

WILDFLOWER

OR
RIGHTS & WRONGS



AUTHOR OF
"UNDER THE SPELL"

"GRANDMOTHER'S
MONEY".

The

printed in
d.



VOL.

1
2
4
5
6
7
9
10
11
12
15
17
18,
20,
22
23,
25
27
28
30,
32
33,
35
36
37
38
39
40

JAMES H. GRAFF,

BALTIMORE

Nº 1240.

Y.

alifax."
alifax."
C. Hall.
alifax."
Savage.
alifax."
t. John.
askell.
wsbury.
Savage.
askell.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
Lever.
iphant.
asonby.
. Grey.
ollope.
Mills.

- 41 Charles Auchester : a Novel. Author of " My First Season."
42 Martins of Cro' Martin. Double vol., 3s. Charles Lever.
44 Sorrows of Gentility Geraldine Jewsbury.
45 Heckington Mrs. Gore.
46 Jacob Bendixen, the Jew Mary Howitt.
47 Mr. and Mrs. Asheton " Margaret and Her Bridesmaids."

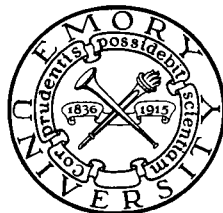
No 826.A

THE SELECT LIBRARY OF FICTION.

VOL.

- | | |
|--|---------------------------|
| 48 Sir Jasper Carew | Charles Lever. |
| 49 Mrs. Mathews | Mrs. Trollope. |
| 50 Marian Withers | Geraldine Jewsbury. |
| 51 Gertrude; or, Family Pride | Mrs. Trollope. |
| 52 Young Heiress | Mrs. Trollope. |
| 53 A Day's Ride: a Life's Romance | Charles Lever. |
| 54 Maurice Tiernay, the Soldier of Fortune | Charles Lever. |
| 55 The Constable of the Tower | W. H. Ainsworth. |
| 56 The Only Child | Lady Scott. |
| 57 Mainstone's Housekeeper | Eliza Meteyard. |
| 58 Master of the Hounds | "Scrutator." |
| 59 Constance Herbert | Geraldine Jewsbury. |
| 60 Cardinal Pole | W. H. Ainsworth. |
| 61 Jealous Wife | Miss Pardoe. |
| 62 Rival Beauties | Miss Pardoe. |
| 63 Hunchback | Victor Hugo. |
| 64 Uncle Walter | Mrs. Trollope. |
| 65 Lord Mayor | W. H. Ainsworth. |
| 66 Elsie Venner | Ivener W. Holmes. |
| 67 Charlie Thorne | Charles Clarke. |
| 68 House of Elphinstone | "mother's Money." |
| 69 Blithedale Farm | N. Hawthorne. |
| 70 Falcon Farm | M. W. Savage. |
| 71 Reuben Medley | M. W. Savage. |
| 72 Country Gentleman | "Scrutator." |
| 73 La Beata | dolphus Trollope. |
| 74 Marietta | dolphus Trollope. |
| 75 Barrington | Charles Lever. |
| 76 Beppo the Clown | dolphus Trollope. |
| 77 Woman's World | F. W. Robinson. |
| 78 Deep Water | Anna H. Drury. |
| 79 Misrepresentation | Anna H. Drury. |
| 80 Tilbury Nogo | Whyte Melville. |
| 81 Queen of the Seas | Captain Armstrong. |
| 82 He Would Be a Gentleman | Samuel Lover. |
| 83 Mr. Stewart's Intentions | F. W. Robinson. |
| 84 Mattie: a Stray | Author of "Owen: a Waif." |
| 85 Doctor Thorne | Anthony Trollope. |
| 86 The Macdermots of Ballycloran | Anthony Trollope. |
| 87 Lindisfarn Chase | Thomas A. Trollope. |
| 88 Rachel Ray | Anthony Trollope. |
| 89 Luttrell of Arran | Charles Lever. |
| 90 Giulio Malatesta | Thomas A. Trollope. |
| 91 Wildflower | F. W. Robinson. |
| 92 Irish Stories and Legends | Samuel Lover. |
| 93 The Kellys and The O'Kellys | Anthony Trollope. |

ROBERT W WOODRUFF
LIBRARY



Sold by all Booksellers, & at Railway Stations.

W I L D F L O W E R :

OR,

RIGHTS AND WRONGS.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"HOUSE OF ELMORE," "WOMAN'S RANSOM," "MR. STEWART'S
INTENTIONS," "GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," ETC., ETC.

"For every one her liked, and every one her loved."

SPENSER.

LONDON :
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

1866.

BOOK I.

“ In that mansion used to be
Free-hearted hospitality.”

LONGFELLOW

WILDFLOWER.

CHAPTER I.

LOST PROPERTY.

THE "Up Train" had come in, the carriages had disgorged their occupants, and the broad stone causeway was alive with crowds of weary travellers, and sturdy blundering porters, and bustling railway guards. It was a cheerless winter's night. The guards were blue with cold, and those who had come up by the train were frosted like figures on a twelfth-cake—the carriage roofs were white with snow—the wheels were clogged with it—the window glass was hidden 'neath its mantle—and even the hissing engine, panting frightfully from its long, long journey, was dotted here and there. From the huge terminus, looking back upon the iron road, could be seen looming from the darkness the broken lines of whitened housetops, and a forest of distorted chimneys—the ghost of a great city—and across the grey density, into which the station lights were streaming, flickered the rapid, silent flakes.

The passengers hurried homewards; the last straggler, muffled to the nose, made his hasty disappearance; the luggage melted imperceptibly away; the guards began to

vanish through doors continually on the swing ; and one man, in a black shiny cap, coat, and trousers, all very much peppered with snow, was briskly trotting by the side of the deserted train, diving his head into every compartment, dashing wildly a dark lantern in and out, and banging doors and twisting handles as only railway guards *can* bang and twist. He had nearly reached the end of the train, when, in one of the dark cavernous third-class carriages, he suddenly started, stopped in his dive, and, thrusting his dark lantern into the gloomy recess, with wild impetuosity, gasped out "Hollo, here !"

And well he might, for, perched upon a back seat, was a little black heap of something, with a smaller black heap of something else in its lap, and two round bright black eyes were staring at the guard from under an indistinguishable covering that might have been a black sack, or a black turban, or a black beaver bonnet, or even a black tea-board rather crumpled.

"Hollo, here ! Who are you ? Come out of this !" were the uncourteous expletives of the surprised official.

"If you please, Sir," piped a little musical voice, "will you take me to the 'Lost Property Office' ?"

The man murmured something about being blown.

"If you please, Sir," continued the voice, "if you'll take me to the 'Lost Property Office' grandpapa will give you sixpence."

"This is a rum go," muttered the man, "here, George !"

George, another shiny young man very much peppered with snow, came clattering down the causeway, and on to the platform.

"Here's a little girl left in the third class. What's to be done with her, George ?"

George, without answering the question, scrambled into the carriage, and made towards the little black heap in the corner.

"What's the matter, my little gal ?" he said roughly. "Why don't you go home ? You mustn't stop here, you know."

"Please, Sir, will you be kind enough to take me to the 'Lost Property Office.'"

"What for ?"

"Grandpa will call for me at the 'Lost Property Office,' Sir."

"Who's your grandpa?"

"Don't know, Sir."

"The child's mad, George," growled official No. 1.

"Hold your tongue a minute," responded George, "I think I see all about it. Your granny is coming to fetch you, ain't he?"

"Yes, if you please, Sir."

"When?"

"Almost directly, Sir."

"Ah! I see now, and you were told to meet him at the 'Lost Property Office'—of course you were. Come along then."

The little girl—for the black heap was a little girl—got down from her seat and, taking the hard cold hand of the big guard, and hugging her tiny bundle to her bosom, proceeded to accompany her escort, whilst guard No. 1 went a few steps further on to give his last bang and twist for the night.

"And where have *you* come from?" asked her protector, as the little girl trotted on by his side.

"Oh! from Bernswood. Jim Simmons drove me to the railway in his cart; it was a nice ride, but very cold."

"Daresay it was," growled the guard, "and a pretty set of people they were to give you to Jim Simmons, and send you such a journey all alone; but some people," added George reflectively, "ain't got no hearts!"

It was a long walk, all down the platform, and along the stone pavement, and right round to the other side. Everything was so quiet now, that the tramp tramp of the guard, and the patter patter of the little black feet, raised more than one echo under that spacious terminus.

"S'pose you've had something to eat, all day?" suddenly inquired George, as he looked down upon his diminutive companion.

"Oh, yes! Mrs. Podgis made me up a bag of sandwiches, and Tom, at the 'Bear,' gave me a bottle of table beer."

"And your father and mother—they didn't seem to do much, at all events."

"If you please they're dead, Sir."

"Oh!"

George had no occasion to make further inquiry, for the child grew suddenly communicative.

"Father died last week, and grandpa sent for me, or they would have put me in the Union. It was very kind of grandpa, wasn't it, Sir? And although I was sorry to leave Bernswood, and Mrs. Podgis, and Spot—that's her great cat, Sir—yet I would rather come to London than be put in that ugly red-brick house, along with the poor people. And what a big place London is, Sir—oh, dear!"

And the child looked up at the iron-ribbed roof of the terminus with wonderment and awe in her dark eyes. •

"Here we are, little Miss," said George, stopping at a door on which was written "Lost Property Office," "and as there's no more trains to-night, I shouldn't wonder if the office was shut up by this time."

But the office was not shut up, for the door opened upon George trying the handle, and he led the little girl into the room. It was a large square room, dimly lighted by one jet of gas. There was a high-shouldered desk in the centre, at which a pale-faced high-shouldered man to match was writing. Another guard, who had evidently just brought in the small portmanteau at his feet, stood by the side of the desk whilst the clerk made an entry of his statement. The room was crowded with books, boxes, hats, bags, parcels of every shape, size and colour, blue lumpy handkerchiefs containing Lubin's Sunday suit and his clean smock-frock, walking-sticks and umbrellas, trunks and carpet-bags, filling shelves and cupboards, and choking corners and recesses—the waifs and strays of the last six months.

Lifting the child to the top of a black box studded with brass nails, George, the guard, went towards the high-shouldered desk, and whispered to the clerk in attendance a few words, which appeared to throw that gentleman into a temporary frenzy.

"Do you think I'm going to let the child remain here? Do you think I'm going to wait any longer than I can help? Do you know I shall leave this very minute, and shall shut the office? Do you want to make a workhouse of the place? Do you know somebody's making a fool of me?"

Without waiting for a reply to any of these interesting questions, poured forth with much volubility and foaming at the mouth, the gentleman jumped from his seat, and began a struggle with a high-shouldered great coat, which he had snatched from a peg in the wall. The guard looked

perplexed, the child sat perched on the black box, nibbling at a tiny thumb that made its appearance from a worn-out kid glove, "a world too wide," when a solution to the mystery was presented by the entrance of an old man, wrapped in a faded cloak of a dirty snuff colour. He walked with some difficulty into the room, and, in a tremulous voice, made the following inquiry :—

"Is there a little girl left here to be called for?"

"Yes, there is," snapped the savage clerk, "and I'd thank you not to come your facetious tricks again with your Lost Property, old gentleman. There she is!"

The old gentleman did not reply, but stood at the door beckoning the child.

When the child had obeyed his summons, and was standing by his side looking up at a dark shrivelled face, he said, in a deeper voice,

"You are Avice?"

"Yes, grandpa."

"Have you been waiting long, Avice?"

"Not long."

"I, I promised the man—let me see, what did my letter say I would give the man, if he took care of you?"

"Sixpence, grandpa."

"Was it sixpence? Dear me! God bless me! sixpence was it?" and he began to rummage nervously in some hidden receptacle for that small coin of the realm.

But the irascible clerk, who had evidently been crossed in love or fortune, he was so fierce and wild, here interposed with "Come, be off, you people! We don't take fees here, you know we don't. There, please to go away—thank you."

The old man and the child slowly walked from the room, along the causeway, through the offices with their swinging glass doors, into the deeply carpeted streets.

"What shoes have you on, Avice?" asked he, looking down at her feet.

"They're not *quite* worn out, grandpa; and I've a better pair in my bundle," she added, assuringly

"Wait here, then; don't you see how it snows? Keep back out of the cold, and draw that rag over your chest, Avice. Now, have you good eyes?"

"Oh, yes, grandpa."

"Don't call me grandpa," he said testily. "I hate your 'pa's' and 'ma's'! Call me grandfather, girl. We will wait here. Now, look into the roadway, and the first omnibus that passes marked with 'Charing Cross,' tell me, and save my eyesight. You *can* read, they say?"

Avice nodded her head. They stood under the shelter of a gateway, a strange ill-assorted pair, attracting many a passing glance from the travellers hurrying by them.

The man could not be less than seventy years of age, and had probably never exceeded five feet four in stature; for now, years or care, or both, had bent him almost double, and made a dwarf of him. His face was not a prepossessing face; it was seamed with yellow, and every feature frightfully prominent; the nose, a thin sharp bloodless nose, jutted out menacingly; the eyes protruded; the blue lips were swollen, and hung forward; and the chin was long and pointed. There was a dismal likeness about him to an ugly doll, or a mask in a pantomime, and more than one wicked boy had been known to scream "Punch" after him in the street. And as he stood there, holding the hand of the child, he looked a very frightful Punch, indeed, taking care of an infinitesimal Judy, until the showman should make his appearance, and pop both of them into his box and walk away with them.

The child would not have made a bad-looking Judy either, and had she appeared over the green baize of the raree show—that green baize which hides so many secrets!—the crowd of gazers would only have laughed and thought it all capital, and very appropriate. She was not a pretty child; she was, perhaps, not an interesting one. The face was older than it should have been—it was almost the face of a little woman. It was the oldness of thought, the premature marks of care and penury, which stamped its character; a face that had evidently looked upon death-beds and deserted homes, and seen much sorrow, and the endurance of much privation; the face of one who had calculated the chances of a day's meal, when death and distress were cowering within the cottage walls. It was a pale white little face, not so much an ugly face as an old-fashioned, and partly redeemed from the latter characteristic by two of the largest black eyes that ever were set in the fair head of woman. They were two such great beaming eyes, that they lit up every

feature, and softened it, and there was but little shadow of their lustre when she glanced, for an instant, at the dark heaven, from which the white down kept falling, falling.

After a silence,

"There's 'Charing Cross,' grandfather."

The child was quick at instructions, and necessity had been a capital school in which to learn obedience, for from the night on which she met the old man by her side, until his last night and their last meeting, she never said "grandpa" again. It was enough for her—he did not like the word.

The old man set up such an uncarthly yell after the vehicle, that the driver pulled up his horses in alarm, and the conductor got down and looked carefully under the wheels for some prostrate fellow-being.

Avice and her grandfather crossed the snow to the omnibus, and the conductor, who had begun to comprehend the sase, opened the door with an expression of indignation on his countenance. Avice had not been seated two minutes in the rumbling conveyance before she folded her small shabby kid gloves over the parcel in her lap, and nodded drowsily.

The omnibus was full, and its heavy jerks threatening to plunge Avice into the pit of a stomach on the opposite side, the owner of which had also gone to sleep nursing a wet umbrella, the grandfather, with a tenderness he had not hitherto exhibited, flung a bit of his snuff-coloured cloak around her, and drew her to his side with his concealing arm. The shabby, crumpled beaver bonnet drooped more and more, and finally rested securely on the old man's breast. He glanced down at her once, and his features changed and worked so frightfully, that a lady with a baby on his left, gave a smothered shriek of alarm.

"Beg pardon—nerves you see!" mumbled the old man, and, turning away, he looked into the wintry street.

Presently they were at Charing Cross, and he engaged in a trifling dispute with the conductor respecting a brass sixpence which the latter individual tendered by way of change; but that difference having been satisfactorily arranged, they were in the deep snow again.

Turning to the left, they were soon amongst those gloomy buildings, government offices and aristocratic mansions of imposing exterior, which crowded together near Whitehall,

and which seem to be eternally jostling each other for more elbow room.

"Are we near home, grandfather?"

"Do you see that house facing us?"

"The large one—yes."

"That is 'home,' Avice."

And leading her across the snow-drift, which here was white and smooth as a bridal raiment, grandfather and grandchild hastened to their home.

CHAPTER II.

A NEW HOME.

It was a great old house; the stones of which it was built inclined to crumble into dust. Standing, with many window sills heaped up with snow, with snow thick upon its front, with snow clinging to every point against which it had been drifted by the wind, it looked like a house in its shroud. It was a government office, and Avice's grandfather was office-keeper. An office where clerks flitted in and out from ten till four; where the doors were always opening and shutting; and where postmen, weary and heavy laden, went up the steep flight of steps, at every delivery, with leathern bags of letters.

But there was a time—before giant Briareus made a Branch Office of the place—there was a time, we say again, when men of rank held it as their own, and kept high holiday therein; when those long blank windows were streaming with light, and the shadows of the great and noble were flung upon the blinds; when strains of melody were borne from its palatial rooms to the ears of fifty coachmen, nodding on their cushioned boxes—when gas was unknown, and the oil lamp shimmered at the corner of the street—when the link boys darted right and left, and under horses' heads—when the lazy watchmen hung about the doors. Time was when the beaux, in their flapping gold-laced waistcoats, square cut coats, and with cocked hats—the true Ramilie cock—in their left hands, squired the ladies down those broad steps to their carriages—ladies in hoops, with towers

of curls on their heads—beauties of the court of Anne and of the first royal George.

But all this had gone by ; the dining-room was a dépôt for papers, fitted up with presses, and full of dusty pigeon-hole receptacles, into which clerks were always burrowing ; the ball-room was the secretary's board-room, and over the massively carved mantelpiece, against which many a beau had leaned, critically surveying the patched and hooped beauties of his day, were hung almanacks, tabular accounts, and printed forms ; and the walls were hidden by presses, even there. There were presses everywhere ; down in the kitchens, up in the attics, lining every passage, and narrowing every way ; and tons and tons of letters choked up the place, and stifled it, weighing upon its groaning vaulted foundations, till they cracked again. The whole house smelt of office.

"What a large house ! I never saw such a large house," whispered Avice to her grandfather, as he rang at the noisy area bell.

He did not reply, but stood on the top step, looking down at the snow.

"Avice," he said in a loud whisper, as a heavy footfall was at last heard advancing to the door.

"Yes, grandfather."

"You said you had good eyes, look at our footsteps—do they not cross others, child ?—see there !"

"I see no other marks upon the snow."

"Ah ! well, well ! Come, Avice."

The door opened, and a tall bony woman stood waiting to admit them.

"You are late, Mr. Hern."

"Rather, rather," he answered, as he led his grandchild into the marble paved hall, which was lighted by a solitary lamp, affixed to a distant pillar. "Did I not tell you, Martha," he added, "never to open the door without enquiry. I might have been ——— anybody, for what you knew."

"I ought to know your ring by this time," the woman answered, shortly.

"Don't talk like that," he cried, peevishly ; "is the bell full of different tones for different hands ? You should be more careful, Martha, at your age—an old woman like you !"

They passed through the hall, and went down a flight of

stone stairs, and along a narrow passage to a room on the ground floor. There was a large fire burning in an old-fashioned grate, and supper was laid on a side table. Martha followed them, and took a seat by the chimney corner, with her head against the mantelpiece. A grizzled canary in a cage by the window gave a chirp of welcome.

"Take her bonnet and shawl off, and see if her feet are wet, will you, Martha?" said the office-keeper, turning to the supper-table.

Martha drew the child towards her.

"So you're Avice Hern?" inquired Martha, in a grating voice, as her big hands, ornamented with extra-sized knuckles, tugged at the strings of the black beaver bonnet.

"Yes, if you please, I—I shall be."

"Shall be?" repeated Martha, grimly inquisitive, and pausing in her emphatic jerks at the complicated bow which Mrs. Podgis had concocted.

"If—if you don't choke me, Ma'am," said the little girl gravely.

Mr. Hern left off cutting the bread and cheese to stare vacantly at his grandchild; and Martha regarded Avice's pale face with a look of fixed severity.

"A funny time to be pert, Miss Hern," said Martha.

"I did not mean to be pert," quietly replied the child. "I did not mean anything but choking, indeed I didn't. Please don't pull so hard."

Martha shook her head ominously, as she took off the bonnet and shawl of Avice, and felt her little damp slippers.

"Wet as sop!" she muttered. "Off with them! What a pair of shoes to come out in this bitter weather—poor little thing!"

Martha's compassion was couched in very wiry tones, although she meant it; but then she was a hard woman, was Martha Badge. She had been housekeeper, general servant, everything to Mr. Hern, long before he had been appointed office-keeper there; and Mr. Hern was not a character that elicited much sympathy in general. She was a woman of granite, with no nerves in her whole system. She would have made a policeman, or one of the Life Guards Blue, and fulfilled her duties to perfection. Nothing touched her weak feelings any more than the work of a galley-slave would have affected her constitution. For all her crude deportment,

and abruptness of discourse, there was an odd attachment to her master which the future development of this story may still further exemplify: she bore with his irritable ways, and implicitly complied with all his mandates, and took her twelve pounds a year with a growling "thank you." She had been a dirty, overgrown girl in Mrs. Hern's time, and maid-of-all-work to the Herns when they were living in a little street at the back of Chelsea; and now she was an old woman, stiff as a board, and about as congenial, to all outward appearance.

The three had their supper, Martha eating hers by the fire, and staring into its depths as she sat and munched, and Avice watching the shadow of her head and blowsy cap on the opposite wall, and thinking of Old Mother Shipton, whose history she had brought all the way from Bernswood in her bundle.

"Those things had better be aired, you know," said Martha after supper, as Avice busied herself with the bundle just alluded to.

"Oh! thank you, yes!" replied Avice; "and I think my night-cap is damp; for Mrs. Podgis put it the top thing; and once, when a man let the window down, all the snow came in upon it."

Presently they were going to bed, little Avice with her thoroughly aired night-cap in her hand.

"Avice had better sleep with you to-night, Martha," said Hern.

"Of course."

"I'm not frightened to sleep alone," said Avice, confidently: "it's only bad girls that the ghosts come to."

"Who taught you that?" asked Martha.

"Mrs. Podgis."

"She was a wise woman," said Martha. "Avice, go and bid your grandfather good-night."

"Good-night, grandfather."

She held up her lips to be kissed; but feigning not to observe the motion, he lightly touched her hand, saying huskily, "Good-night, Avice!"

They went out of the room and stopped. The voice of old Hern was calling Martha from within.

"Wait a moment," said the housekeeper; and leaving Avice standing in the passage, she returned.

Avice had sharp ears ; for, despite the low tone of inquiry she heard her grandfather say,

"Has *he* been here to-night, Martha ? "

"No."

"I passed him in the street to-night ; he brushed by me—we touched each other's arms ! "

"Did he see you ? "

"No, thank God ! "

"So much the better."

Martha returned to Avice, and led her up the stairs—up and up, till she was lost in a maze of long dark passages with countless doors at every turn.

"Who sleeps in all these rooms, Mrs. Badge ? " asked Avice.

"Nobody ; they are offices for people who come in the day-time, and *write*," with a disparaging emphasis, that told of a thorough contempt for manuscript, "till four o'clock in the afternoon."

"Poor things !" said the sympathising Avice, "how their fingers must ache ! "

Martha paused at the top of another flight, and pushed open a door which stood on the left hand side. They entered a plainly furnished room ; and Martha set the light upon a chest of drawers, and then locked the door.

"Is this your room ? " said Avice.

"This is mine. Yours will be next to it."

She took off her cap as she spoke, and hung it on a nail. She looked so fearful without a cap, that Avice undressed herself with a shudder. When she put on a huge night-cap with countless frills, Avice could bear it no longer, so tightly shut her eyes.

After a time they were in bed, Martha rigid and corpse-like.

"Mrs. Badge," whispered Avice.

"Yes."

"Who is *he* ? "

"What, child ? "

"Who is *he* that grandfather asked about down stairs ? "

"Did you hear ? "

"Yes."

"A bad man, my dear ; and the less we know about him the better. There, say your prayers and go to sleep." And Martha shut her eyes, and began to snore profoundly.

Avice joined her tiny hands together; and in that darkened room lisped out many childish prayers; and then dropped peacefully off into dream-land, and went back to Bernswood, and Mrs. Podgis, and Spot, the great cat.



CHAPTER III.

A SPELLING LESSON.

WHEN Avice Hern awoke on the following morning the sun was streaming into the room, and Martha Badge was gone.

Avice got up, dressed herself, and brushed some splashes of dirty snow off her black frock, after which she looked out of the little window at the Thames.

“Oh! there’s the river—there’s the river!” she cried, clapping her hands, “and the sun shining on it, and the boats! How pretty to be sure!”

It was a bright winter’s morning; and the broad river glistened in the sun. There was a light golden mist hanging round St. Paul’s, and a haze about house-tops, factory chimneys, church steeples, and the brick-and-mortar wilderness across the river which rendered the scene quite picturesque. The snow was thawing rapidly, dripping from the massive stone coping of the roof above the window, from the coal barges drifting down with the tide, from steamboats lying at their moorings, from tarpaulins covering huge mounds of hay in vessels gliding onwards, from roofs of wharves and breweries, and buttresses of bridges, making a grand dissolving view of everything.

The child lingered at the window, and watched the life upon the silent highway with her great wondering eyes. It was the first river Avice Hern had seen in her young life; and its novelty attracted her. Bernswood was an inland village—a pretty, green nook in an English landscape; and the murmuring brook that went round by the alders, and turned the old water-worn wheel of the little mill, was nothing to this! Why, in one place she could have jumped across that brook, if Mrs. Podgis had let her; and Spot, he did it every day, after the birds he never caught.

"Oh ! are you up ?"

Avice turned her head, and saw the hard features of Mrs. Badge peering round the door.

"Good morning, Ma'am," said Avice.

"Ah, good morning ! will you come down to breakfast ?"

"Is grandfather awake ?"

"Oh, yes !"

Avice left her post of observation, and went out on the landing-place after Martha.

"We shall have your room ready to-night, Avice," said Martha ; "this is it."

"Oh ! I hope it looks upon this beautiful river," she cried, pushing open the door, and running to the window. Satisfied with the result of her scrutiny, and without a glance at the neatness of the apartment, or the tasty manner in which Martha had festooned the chintz bed curtains, she darted out again, and trotted down stairs after the gaunt housekeeper.

Mr. Hern was up, and waiting for his breakfast. He looked more like Punch than ever in the daylight, a respectable kind of Punch though, for he was brushed up for office hours, wore a russety black dress coat, with only one button off the sleeve, had a tiny brooch of gold wire fastened to his clean shirt, and was, on the whole, a dapper little gentleman, with an annihilating stoop.

"Come, come, Avice, this is a bad hour—nine o'clock."

"Is it so late, grandfather ?" she said, "oh, dear ! And my time is always six, too. But I have been up some time, looking at the river."

"Six o'clock ! a very good time for little girls," remarked her grandfather ; "when the spring comes, Avice, you shall help me in the garden."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Now, Martha, pour the coffee out."

Martha unbent her stiff frame a little, and dropped into a chair, and the day commenced for Avice Hern.

After breakfast, Avice had the morning almost to herself, and there was plenty of time to observe and grow familiar with her new home. Martha Badge, assisted by Betsy, a wan-looking aide-de-camp, who made her appearance from a dark cellar in the area, where she had been filling coal-scuttles since daylight for the office rooms, went wandering about the lower regions on bewildering missions, whilst

above stairs, there was a constant ringing at the bell, and a continual opening of the door. A flood of clerks, young, middle-aged, and sexagenarians, set in as the clock struck, and came up the steps from which the deep snow of the preceding night had been shovelled away, and went buzzing about the house like bees in a hive.

Avice raised the blind of the sitting-room, the window of which had a cheerful prospect of the area, with occasional glimpses of Betsy, clicking about in pattens, and looked at the entrance steps, and saw the clerks wend their way up them in all variety of boots. Then, the scarlet-coated postman came, in a great bustle, with town, country, and foreign letters, and there was money to be paid on the last, and Mr. Hern's voice was heard snapping up the postman. Then came a straggling clerk, who was reported for being late, and after that, with a whirl and a plunge, Mr. Arthur William Stanmore's carriage, followed by Mr. Arthur William Stanmore himself, secretary to the office, near Whitehall, who ran up the steps three at a time, and disappeared.

When the bell had ceased ringing, and there was a humming throughout the house—just like there was at her own school down in Bernswood, Avice thought—little Miss Hern went in search of Martha Badge, and, chancing upon that lady in the kitchen, requested something to do.

"You musn't trouble now," said Martha, who was on her knees, deep in the calculation of a mass of office towels, piled in a huge basket before her.

"But mayn't I have a duster, Mrs. Badge?"

"Thirteen, fourteen—don't bother—fifteen—do go away!"

Avice was returning, somewhat crestfallen, to the parlour, when Martha called out her name.

Avice stopped.

"You'll find a spelling-book in the table drawer; learn a bit of it, and I'll hear you after dinner, Avice. It'll keep you in practice till you go to school."

Avice went back to the room, and found the book at the back of the drawer indicated. It was a very old book, with one cover off, and the other suspended by a few threads; several leaves were missing, and those which remained were dog-eared and dirty. On the title-page was written, in a fine schoolmistress's hand, a hand that had long since re-

solved itself into its native dust, "Master Walter Hern—his book."

Walter Hern! who could that be? Her grandfather's name was James, and her own father—"poor father," whispered Avice—was called after him. After some reflection, which did not tend to throw much light on the subject, Avice set herself to learn a column of two syllables, and applied herself with such hearty good-will to the task, that in less than an hour she was master—or mistress, perhaps—of all the hard words on the list.

When that feat was accomplished, she resolved to run and surprise Mrs. Badge with an exhibition of her diligence, but Mrs. Badge was nowhere to be found, and Betsy, upon being cross-questioned concerning her, thought she had gone up stairs. Ignorant of the sacred precincts of "office," and of the divinity that doth hedge a government, Avice started in search of Mrs. Badge, and toiled up the stairs, and along the passages, carelessly turning mysterious corners, which led to more stairs, and more passages, that she had never seen before, until she was finally lost in the great house. She came upon windows that looked upon the river, upon windows that looked into the street, upon clerks, with pens behind their ears, who were carrying unwieldy books—ugly dirty brown books, with red backs,—and who stared with astonishment at the small apparition in their path; upon clerks' legs, sticking out of open cupboards and presses in the passages, the owners of those members being engaged in diving for especial papers; upon clerks, with lanterns, who were going into the dark dépôt, on the first floor, where the letters were kept; upon everything but Martha Badge.

Avice grew more bewildered in her ideas; there was such a noise of banging doors, that it frightened her. She fancied she had gone up too high, at last, and came down again by a back stone staircase, which she remembered perfectly, and then took another turning, hoping that it would lead her to her uncle's parlour; but it did not, although there was a door at the end of the passage very much like a door she had seen somewhere in the house, and so she made a dash at it and opened it.

She would have given all she had in the world—though it was not much—to have got safely out again, and unobserved; but she had no power to move, and could only

stand fascinated by the gaze of two pairs of eyes which met her own, and transfixed her.

Avice had entered the room of Mr. Arthur William Stanmore—the great ball-room, so symbolical of “once upon a time;”—and at the table, and before a handsome desk, glittering with silver fittings, sat the secretary, a tall young man of about thirty years of age, whilst at the opposite end sat an old gentleman, with a bald head, great white whiskers, and gold spectacles. Both gentlemen laid down their pens, and stared aghast at her.

“What do you want? what is it? what is it?” rapidly asked the old gentleman.

“Please, Sir, I—I want Martha Badge.”

The secretary leaned back in his chair, and gave a short laugh; but the old gentleman looked cross, and Avice immediately began to cry.

“Go away—go away—go away!” said the senior gentleman, flourishing a fat white hand in the direction of the door; “there, there, go away with you!”

Avice had mustered sufficient strength to make a retrograde movement, when the secretary called her.

She timidly advanced.

“Well, my little girl, and who’s Martha Badge? There, don’t cry, I’m not going to eat you!”

He was a handsome man, and he looked so kindly at Avice, with his dark-brown eyes, that she ceased whimpering, and answered:

“Mrs. Badge is my grandfather’s housekeeper, Sir.”

She concluded with a deep, reverential courtesy.

• “And who is your grandfather, my little maid?”

“Mr. Hern—this is his house, Sir!”

The young secretary checked another short laugh, by covering his lips with a well-shaped hand, and said,

“Indeed, that is a piece of information; thank you. And what did you want with Mrs. Badge?”

“I thought that she would be kind enough to hear my spelling, Sir.”

Mr. Arthur William Stanmore took the dirty book from the hands of the young scholar, and slightly glanced at the page before him.

“You have learned your lesson?” he inquired.

“Oh, yes! Sir.”

"Good girl," he said. "How old are you?"

"Ten, Sir."

"Ten! a good working age. There," giving back the spelling-book, "you may go now, and here's half-a-crown to put in your money-box. What did you say your name was?"

"Avice."

"Avice! old-fashioned name—old-fashioned child," mused he. Then, addressing her, he said, "you lost your way coming here, did you not, Miss Avice?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Mr. Lowry, will you be kind enough to ring the bell? The orderly can show the child to the housekeeper's room," he said, taking up his pen.

The old gentleman, who was chief clerk, and kept his brougham, and a villa at Norwood, rang the bell, as directed, and as Avice found some difficulty in re-opening the door, he rose, with much evident disgust, and, after turning the handle, gently pushed the child out of the room.

"You mustn't do this again—very silly, very absurd," he said, with remarkable volubility of speech. "Tell Mrs. Badge to keep you to your own room, and not to, to, to, to come disturbing gentlemen in the office again. There's the orderly, ask him to show you to your own apartments; there, go along, go along!" And with a parting push on the back, he returned to the secretary, who was affixing his signature to a paper, that would be a spelling lesson to all England, and afford matter for a next week's leader in the "Times."

CHAPTER IV

"WALTER."

WHEN Avice Hern related her morning's adventure, at the dinner-table, old James Hern's face lengthened considerably, and Martha Badge laid down her knife and fork, and clasp-
ing her great iron hands, exclaimed, "Good Lord, what a child this is!"

"He wasn't offended, or he'd never have given the child

half-a-crown," said the office-keeper, "but don't do it again, or we shan't be friends, Avice, we shan't indeed. But, Mr. Lowry?"

"Is that the fat man with the bald head, grandfather?"

"Yes. What did he say?"

"Oh, I don't know! he was cross, I think."

"Ah," said James Hern, dryly, "that's very likely."

Dinner was soon over; Mr. Hern retook his way up stairs, and Martha Badge brought an immense work-box to the light, and sat down before it, with a new cotton print dress in her hand.

"This is your'n, for morning, Avice," said Martha, holding the dress up; "we'll go out together to-morrow, and buy your Sunday black one."

"Two new frocks at once! how kind my grandfather is," cried Avice; "how everybody must love him—don't you love him, Mrs. Badge?"

"Um," grunted Martha.

"Can I do anything towards that?" asked Avice, with a wistful glance at the article of her inquiry.

"Why, what can *you* do?"

"Oh, I can sew anything—try me!"

"Get a needle and thread out of the box, then, and put some paper inside that thimble to make it fit, and come and sit here by the window."

Martha Badge and Avice were soon busily working at the new frock, and Avice's nimble fingers plied the needle with more than common dexterity, and eclipsed all Mrs. Badge's efforts in that line, despite the aid of an enormous pair of iron-rimmed spectacles, which the old lady had put on for "fine work." Martha made no comment on Avice's progress. She was not given to praise, or offering encouragement, so she sat stiff, upright and prim, and gouged at the cotton print, and did not find fault, to which she had all along looked forward as a thing of course.

Afternoon soon passed; the Horse Guards' clock over the way—it could be heard chiming the "quarters" in every room of the house—struck four, and immediately there was a deal of bustle over head, and much tramping about the passages, and a repetition of every variety of boots going down the steps; then, a carriage came for Mr. Arthur William Stanmore, and a dark-green brougham for Mr.

Lowry, and away they went after the boots. When the house was quiet, and the humming of the bees had all died away, Avice followed her grandfather through the deserted rooms, and watched him close and fasten the ponderous iron-lined shutters over the windows, and wondered what robbers could see to tempt them in such a dusty gloomy place, and why government should take such pains to keep them out of it.

As they looked through the windows of the secretary's room, before fastening the shutters, Mr. Hern pointed to the grey sky.

"There will be more snow to-night, Avice!"

"That there will," assented his grandchild, with a curious look at the clouds, "I know it'll snow, because the wind blows for it—they used to call me little weatherwise down in Bernswood, grandfather."

"Did they?" he replied, dreamily.

Something was on old James Hern's mind that night, for he went twice to the same room, to make sure it was properly secured, and walked very thoughtfully down all the passages, shaking his head gravely as he went.

When they were in the hall, and he had drawn a heavy iron chain across the door, the snow he had prophesied concerning began to fall, and when they were having tea, by the fire-light, they could see the flakes pouring swiftly past the parlour windows into the area.

"Martha!" suddenly cried Hern, after a silence of some minutes' duration.

What an unpleasant yell he had—Avice nearly dropped her cup.

"What is it?"

"Close the window shutters! how many times have I had to say 'close them,' in my life?" he cried passionately, "you're always forgetting the shutters, and we might as well sit in the street—we might!"

Avice ran to forestall Mrs. Badge. She looked up at the area railings for an instant, started, and cried out—

"Oh, grandfather, grandfather! there's a man looking in at us—up there, in the street!"

Avice pointed to the dark figure of a man whose face was pressed against the railings of the area, and who was eagerly peering through them at the inmates of the parlour.

James Hern gave a kind of wail, covered his face with his thin hands, and began rocking himself to and fro.

"Never—never quit of him! for ever coming back to blight each hour of my life—to curse me in my poor old age!"

"Rubbish!" said Martha, striding to the windows, and banging to the shutters, first one and then the other, with a clashing noise, which frightened the grizzled canary off its perch, "some prowling beggar, with lucifers—that's all. They're always coming here, the waga—bones!"

She strode back to the tea-table, and gruffly asked her master "if he'd take another cup?"

"Not to-night," he answered, wearily, "Avice will, I dare say. Ask her."

"Avice?" said Martha, inquiringly.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Badge."

There was a long silence, during which the office-keeper still kept slowly rocking himself in his chair, and Martha Badge sat scowling at the tea-pot with intense ferocity.

"Have you sent Betsy home?" asked the old man at last, his thoughts recurring to every-day matters, and his rocking movements suddenly coming to a termination.

"Long ago."

"Paid her?"

"Yes."

"Light the lamp, and bring me the draught-board. I'll teach Avice."

Avice, pleased to be taught anything, took the seat opposite her grandfather. Mrs. Badge lighted the lamp, and placed the board and men between them.

The office-keeper's shrivelled, yellow face was more ghastly since his alarm, and, as he arranged the white and black men on their respective squares, his hands were trembling nervously.

Mrs. Badge again spread Avice's frock on the table, put on her appalling spectacles, and, tightly compressing her rigid lips—stony as a Sphinx's—sat like an interesting patient suffering from lock-jaw.

Avice and her grandfather proceeded with the lesson, and the former was soon initiated into the mysteries of the game, and was apt pupil enough to have satisfied the keenest disciple of old Sturge.

The bell rang—the hand of James Hern, which had been hovering over his kings, fell, like a dead man's, upon the board, and sent the draughts scattering about the room.

"It's the post," said Martha. "I heard the double-rap first."

"Ah, likely!" he murmured, "pick up those men I dropped, Avice—there's a good girl. Dear me, dear me, I'm getting very nervous!"

Avice restored each piece to its place, and when Mrs. Badge returned with the news that it was the postman, and she had left the letters in the box, they were fathom deep in their game.

"Did you look at the letters, Martha?"

"Yes, all of them."

"None for me?"

"None."

"Proceed, Avice."

Avice, after glancing anxiously at Mr. Hern, made the required move.

The night stole on; many a game had been contested between the players; and Mrs. Badge had quietly dropped asleep over her work, with a menacing needle pinched tightly between her finger and thumb.

Another ring at the bell—a more violent ring this time—that sent a noisy peal throughout the house, and startled the three inmates of the parlour for the third time. Martha Badge soon recovered her composure; and with a yawn, laid her work on the table, and rose to respond to the summons.

"It is he—it is he!" muttered the office keeper. "What is to be done, Martha?"

"It's more likely to be some of those blundering messengers from the other offices with their wrong parcels," replied Mrs. Badge, indignantly. "They're always doing it. But—" she paused.

"Go on."

"But if it should be—the man," said Martha, with lowering eyebrows, "what then?"

"Ask who is there before you open the door," cried old Hern in alarm.

"Yes, and if—"

"If it be he, let him come in," said he, despairingly.

"What can I do? I am helpless—I cannot evade him. He would come to-morrow, and beard me in my office, and disgrace me before the clerks. Let him come!"

Martha went up stairs with a lantern (the rules of the office did not allow unguarded lights about a house so full of papers), and the man waiting without having become impatient, gave another noisy ring before she reached the door.

Old James Hern folded his hands together; and forgetful of the game, and of his grandchild wistfully gazing at him, listened to the retiring footsteps of Martha, as they tramped heavily up stairs.

"Perhaps it's not the man you're so frightened of, grandfather," said Avice, assuringly.

"Frightened! ah! I may well be frightened, Avice," he answered with a sigh. "I feel it *is* the man, child. I met him yesterday, and knew he would come one night like this to—to—hark!"

He held up a finger, and Avice, with suspended breath, listened attentively. The door was opened, closed again, and there were high-pitched voices echoing in the hall—the grating tones of Martha Badge exalted to a hideous, shrieking torrent of vituperation, and a powerful and deep note, like the bay of a hound replying. The old man seemed to cower more and more as the footsteps were heard at last advancing—to crouch back in his chair with a look of fear and horror on his face—to sink his head upon his breast, and moan softly to himself. The door was rudely flung back; and Martha Badge, like a Pythoness, came raving into the room.

"Here's your vile son—the wicked, ungrateful wretch—come back to wring your heart and make it bleed. A villian whom God spared, when honest men were dying."

"Hush! hush!" pleaded her master faintly.

"You may well say 'hush,'" cried a deep voice. "It's only my good nature that saves the old cat's throat."

There entered the room a tall, burly-looking ruffian, who flung himself with a crash into the first chair near the door, as if totally exhausted.

He was about forty years of age, of muscular build, with a dark, brutal face, lowering from amidst thick masses of tangled hair. An old brown great-coat was buttoned to his

chin ; and into its pockets he had thrust both arms to the elbow.

Avice shuddered as she stole a sidelong glance at the man lying back in the chair, his brawny shoulders, battered hat, and great boots heaped with snow. Martha Badge, watchful and implacable, stood a few paces from him with her big arms folded in a mute defiance.

"Well, father !" he growled out.

"Well," was the faint reply.

"You see I've come back," said he. "I've done my best to keep away, to earn my honest crust without bothering you for help—you who have a natural right to help me."

"There is no natural tie between you," broke in Martha. "You who have ever been unnatural have no right to say there is, robber."

"By God—"

"Walter," shrieked the old man, "be patient ! She knows not what she says in her vehemence. Do not listen to her !"

"I haven't come here to quarrel, nor to be quarrelled with," replied the man. "Bygones are bygones, so why say more about them ? I don't trouble you much, Lord knows ! Why it is three years since I saw you last."

The father groaned.

"Ah ! I dare say you wished I was in my grave, or hung up by the neck on some black gallows, and so rid of me. There is no affection lost, I take it," said the man. "Well, I worked hard to keep away from you. I didn't want to torment you by such a hated object as I am ; but it was no go—worse and worse everything went with me—down and down, and lower and lower ; and now you see me here !"

"What do you want ?"

"Why do you ask him what he wants, James Hern ?" vehemently cried Martha, her eyes flashing from beneath her spectacles. "Whatever has he wanted but to drain you of the money you have toiled and struv for ? He would not come to your dying bed unless there was sixpence to be gained. Look at him sitting there, and see if I don't speak truth. What does he want !" she reiterated. "What did he want when he crept into your room with his false keys—he was but a boy then !—and with his greedy, sinful hands, stole from you all you had ?"

"Martha!" implored the office-keeper.

"I will speak," exclaimed the intrepid Mrs. Badge. "I am not to be frightened by his bullying looks, or cowed by the stamping of his feet. Take your muddy boots off the rails of the chair, do, you wretch!"

"Go it," said the man, resignedly.

"And I will go it, as you call it," continued Martha; "and *you* shan't hinder me! Look at your poor father in that chair, and contrast his weakness with your coward's strength—his shame with your brazen-faced defiance. You a man!" she cried, with withering scorn, "you have not the courage of a dog."

"Go it—go it! I hope this'll last all night. It's uncommonly refreshing, on a cold evening like this. So nice and warm, you see."

"Beast!"

And having given vent to this expletive, Martha Badge folded her arms once more and closed the subject from sheer want of breath.

"Now, father, I'll put it to you if all this is very kind or complimentary, and whether I don't stand it like a sainted stained-glass martyr?" he said. "I am not a bad-tempered man, or I should have had Mother Badge on her back long afore this."

Mrs. Badge's fists clenched.

"But I mean no harm—why should I?" he went on. "I look upon everybody here as friends, even you, little miss, with those blessed great black goggles of yours; and I wish to part friendly, if it's possible. All I want is a few pounds. You have it, I haven't; you're my father, I'm your son. You promised long ago, if I kept away from here, to pay me an annual sum, which you have done, I must acknowledge, like an old trump. But things will turn out unfortunate at times, and I'm hard up!"

"How much do you want?" enquired the father, who had not looked once towards his ruffian son sitting by the door.

"Christmas has just turned, and you must be pretty snug with that salary," mused he; "can you lend me thirty pounds? I'll pay you again, or may I drop down dead this minute?"

"Don't, Wat, don't!" said the trembling office-keeper.

'I haven't got the money—I drew a great deal before the time; Mr. Stanmore was kind enough to let me.'

"And what have you done with it?" asked Walter Hern roughly.

"I paid my life insurance and my own debts, and the doctor for my son James, and his undertaker—"

"Is he dead?" exclaimed the son.

"Yes, dead—dead!"

There was a momentary silence, and Walter Hern sat gazing at the floor. Perhaps he was thinking of the time when they were both boys, and played together in the green fields; thinking perhaps, also, of how suddenly death had come and borne his brother away to Bernswood churchyard. There is no man, however hardened be his nature, who can bear the tidings of the sudden unlooked-for death of one he has known, and whose pursuits he has shared, without a momentary shock, as chilling as if the cold hand of him gathered by the Reaper touched for a moment the warm heart of the living.

"Poor chap!" said Walter Hern, shaking off the incumbrance of a sad thought, "he's better in Heaven, ain't he? He wasn't a bad sort, as the world wags. I suppose that's his little girl."

There was an almost imperceptible nod from his father.

"Think I see a likeness, for she's a twist-about face, like all the Herns; and upon my soul, they were an ugly lot! I don't flatter myself, but it's a fact. But about the thirty pounds, now?"

"I have not got it."

"Twenty?"

"I cannot spare it."

"Honour?"

"Yes."

"Well, I won't be hard upon you, I'll try and make fifteen do—there!"

"Go to work," snapped up Mrs. Badge.

"Hollo! I'd forgotten you," said he, "I thought you'd gone to sleep, old woman. Work! to be sure I'll work, if there's a penny to be made by it. Will you get me a place, or give me a character—will *you* help me?"

Mrs. Badge tossed her head, but made no reply.

"Fifteen pounds, father?"

"Will you give me a light, Mrs. Badge?" asked the office-keeper.

"The lantern's outside," she replied gruffly.

James Hern rose, and after making a circuit round the table to prevent coming in contact with his son, passed out and went shuffling feebly up the stairs.

When he had gone, Martha Badge began to indulge in a series of visible writhings and impatient snorts, strongly indicative of another explosion, but catching Avice's frightened glance, she subsided into a grim silence, after a short but violent struggle with something hard in her throat.

The old man came slowly back to the room, and after dropping a chinking little bag into the hands of the intruder, crossed with his shaking head studiously averted from him to his seat by the fire.

"Thank'ee."

Stowing the bag away in an inner receptacle of his coat, which he carefully rebuttoned, the son rose to go.

"You needn't come up stairs, Mrs. Badge; I can let myself out."

"Thank you; I'll see the back of you, if you please."

"Well, good-night, father. I hope this will be the last time I shall ever trouble you."

"I hope so!"

"Good-night, and thank'ee again."

He strode across the room and shook the cold, damp hand of his father, as it lay passively in his for a moment, and then, with a nod to Avice, marched out, followed by the prudent housekeeper.

When the up-stairs door had banged against him, old James Hern buried his head in his arms amongst the neglected draughts, and sobbed and moaned convulsively.

"He's my son—my only son! Good God! He who should be the staff of my old age, and a comfort to me in my declining years! Oh, Lord, good Lord, forgive him!"

"Don't cry, grandfather—dear grandfather," pleaded the child, clambering on to the chair, and hanging over him with her arms round his neck and her glossy raven hair mingling

with his scanty locks of silver grey; "let Avvy be your staff and comfort. Perhaps I was sent for it—who knows? Oh! don't cry so, don't cry!" and Avice began to sob most piteously herself.

Mrs. Badge came back, gently lifted Avice from her caressing position, passed her sturdy arm through her master's, and led him like a child out of the room. Before Avice had ceased crying, Martha had returned.

"He's gone to his bed-room now; he will be better to-morrow," she said, gloomily. "Do you want any supper, Avice?"

"Oh, no, no! I cannot eat—I think it would choke me," cried she.

"Then let us put the lamp out, and go to bed."

Suiting the action to the word, Mrs. Badge extinguished the table lamp, and Avice and the housekeeper went up the back stone staircase, the lantern making fitful shadows on the steps before them.

"Is grandfather asleep, Mrs. Badge?"

"Not yet."

"May I bid him 'good-night,' outside the door, please?"

"If you like, child!"

When they had reached the door of his room, Avice tapped.

"Good-night, grandfather."

She had to repeat the tap and words.

"Ah! is that you, Avice?" replied the weak voice from within, "good—good-night, my dear, good-night!"

Avice followed Mrs. Badge up the next flight of stairs with a lighter heart.

"I—I don't think I'll sleep in my pretty room to night," suggested Avice, timidly.

"Just as well not," shortly answered Martha.

As Avice Hern prepared for bed, Martha sat heaped on a chair, tugging at a boot-lace. It was an obstinate and self-willed boot-lace, for when Avice had said her prayers, and was curled between the cold sheets, and shivering with the contact, Martha still sat and tugged and stared dreamily at the lantern on the drawers. Martha left off pulling at the knot, and got into a deeper current of thought, and little

Avice lay and watched, with her round black eyes peering over the coverlet.

Martha kept so long in one position, staring at the light, that Avice, somewhat startled, whispered :

"Mrs. Badge."

"What is it?"

"Don't you feel well, Mrs. Badge?"

"I'm never ill, child," she answered, making a second sally at the boot-lace.

A pause, and then a gentle voice again :

"Mrs. Badge."

"God bless the child! what now?"

"How is it that I have never heard of *him* before? that my poor father and mother never spoke of *him*?"

"Who?"

"The man who came to-night."

"I don't know; he was not worth talking about—a villain."

"Poor grandfather!"

"Ay, poor grandfather, indeed; he had three sons, and they have all been a curse to him, every one of 'em."

"Three?"

"Yes."

"Who were they, Mrs. Badge?"

"How the child bothers, to be sure!" muttered Martha, breaking the obstinate boot-lace in her petulance. "Why, there was your father, who was the best of the bad bunch, but who would marry a mincing, country, consumptive girl, and went and lived at Bernswood with her, and never cared to see his poor father again; and Richard, who ran away from home, long, long before you were born, when he was a child himself, and went to sea, and was lost, or drowned, or something—it doesn't matter which—and this one, the eldest born, who was a bad boy, and a thief from his cradle. I've nussed them all. I nussed your grandmother through her first confinement. I've seen them all grow up, and drop off from him like the rotten fruit drops off from the old tree! They left him only me, a sour, crabbed old woman, with no thought or feeling to keep his loneliness from killing him."

"I don't think you're speaking the truth, Mrs. Badge."

“What!”

Mrs. Badge was wrestling with the other boot-lace, and had already twisted herself into an ingenious and complicated knot; but she managed to turn round in her chair, like a witch on a pivot, upon hearing this accusation, and almost consumed with her indignant glances the calumnious Avice.

“I don’t think you’re without thought or feeling, Mrs. Badge.”

“You know nothing about it,” sharply replied Martha, “and if you ever say I don’t speak the truth again, I’ll—drat it!”

Snap went boot-lace number two.

“My poor father used often to talk of grandfather, and wish that he could only spare the money to run down to London for a day or two; and he used to fret and say—especially during the last few days, when I sat by him, Mrs. Badge—that he was was dying all alone, and his own father wouldn’t come to see him die.”

Avice wiped her eyes with the string of her night-cap.

“Your grandfather was ill in bed, or he would have gone, Avice. He was eaten up with rheumatiz, and has only just recovered,” replied the housekeeper. “He’s a poor sufferer at the best of times—body and mind—mind and body!”

She tied her own nightcap with a jerk, and Avice instinctively shut her eyes.

“Ah! its time you went to sleep,” said Mrs. Badge, not fully able to account for the symptoms of somnolency so suddenly exhibited in Avice. “I never heard such a chatterbox in my life. It’s awful!”

She shook her grim head at herself in the dressing-glass.

“And you’re not much better, Martha Badge, an old fool like you to be clatter-clatter, like a water-mill, at this time of life. Come, get into bed, and don’t stand there, you fright, don’t!”

And with these complimentary personal allusions, she began a ferocious attack upon hooks and eyes, and stay-laces; and here the humble historian of these pages thinks it but an act of decorum on his part to leave Mrs. Badge, or Miss Badge, more strictly speaking, and shut the door on virgin modesty.

CHAPTER V

MRS. WRICKERTON'S ESTABLISHMENT FOR YOUNG LADIES.

MRS. MARTHA BADGE did not forget the promise she had made on the afternoon of the preceding day, for she took Avice out, before the sun went down, and bought the Sunday frock that had been promised.

It was a rare treat for Avice to see the great London shops, the sheets of plate glass, and the costly shawls, silks, and satins behind them; the gold watches, chains, and rare fruit for the garden of Aladdin; the fancy repositories and the toy-shops in the Lowther Arcade. Martha Badge bought Avice a money-box, too—a cardboard castle, labelled “Savings’ Bank,” with two real glass windows in it, and a slit in the tiles for the convenience of deposit; and this box Avice carried home in triumph, and set up as central ornament on the mantelpiece in the underground parlour of the office near Whitehall, and put the half-crown inside it which Mr. Arthur William Stanmore had given her.

Mrs. Badge had gravely told her that if money were put by, penny by penny, and sixpence by sixpence, it would grow—yes, actually grow—an incalculable sum in a few short years, and make a rich lady or gentleman, as the case might be, of the careful treasurer.

Avice gravely listened to these wondrous communications from the worthy housekeeper, mentally regretting though, if the truth must be told, that falling-off from the straight way so fearfully apparent in the discourse of Mrs. Badge. This was the second time Avice had caught her; yet Avice’s doubts were somewhat shaken upon dusting her “Savings’ Bank”—an act she performed every morning, with scrupulous exactitude—and hearing the rattle of more than one piece of money inside. Could it be possible; did money accumulate so soon, and was Martha Badge right in her astounding affirmation? Why, it was “growing” an incalculable sum already! She peered through the slit in the roof, and held the box to the light, and distinctly saw *two* half-crowns in friendly companionship within. Her grandfather knew nothing concerning this surprising incident, and Avice, who

had a vague suspicion of conspiracy, cross-examined Mrs. Badge with much ingenuity, and with more than common pertinacity.

"Another half-a-crown," grunted Martha, "what should I know about another half-a-crown? Do you think *I've* any half-crowns to give away, you little simpleton?"

"But, Mrs. —"

"There, go away do," said Martha; "don't you see I'm busy?"

"But is it not surprising?"

"Oh, very!" said Martha, as she scuttled up stairs, and put an end to further questioning.

Time went on: it was soon more than a week, then a month, since James Hern had brought his grandchild to live with him in the great old house. Walter Hern came no more, and Avice was quite at home.

Avice had become acquainted with every room in the mansion; every cross turning and dark recess had been rigorously inspected, before and after office hours, when the clerks had gone home, and the place was empty. She superintended the dusting of the rooms by Mrs. Badge in the mornings, and had her own room to attend to—no less a one than the huge board-room in which Mr. Arthur William Stanmore had questioned her about the spelling-lesson.

And no room was ever so scrupulously dusted in the wide world. She went over each article in it at least half-a-dozen times; and polished and breathed on the top of Mr. Stanmore's desk, and polished again till Mr. Stanmore could have curled his own whiskers before it. Mr. Lowry's desk received a fair share of notice; but if Avice were pressed for time, or had come down late, it was always Mr. Lowry's side of the room that received the least attention.

Once, Mr. Arthur William Stanmore came early, and caught Avice arranging his chair at the right angle, and retiring a step or two to watch the *tout ensemble*, and rearranging, and, in fact, extremely busy.

Mr. Stanmore was pleased to ask her a great many questions, and to laugh at the odd answers he received, and to finally wish her a "good-morning" with such a cheerful, good-tempered smile, that he won Avice's heart for ever.

Avice, judged by the one fish in the sea, and that an uncommon specimen, when she said to her old friend :

"What nice people secretaries are, Mrs. Badge—how I like them!"

Avice had been a resident in the house about six weeks, when Mr. Stanmore began to arrive at irregular periods, and once or twice came late in the afternoon, looking white, and haggard; and then it was whispered among the clerks, and came drifting even to the parlour of the office-keeper, that Mr. Arthur Stanmore's wife was very ill. How interested Avice was then, and how she used to run up, every day, to the door-keeper, with whom she had made friends, and who knew all the news of the office, to ask after Mrs. Stanmore's health. When the door-keeper was at fault, or in ignorance, or too busy, Avice had the temerity to wait for the carriage that came at four o'clock in the afternoon, to take the secretary home, and to slyly slip out at the area gate, and to inquire of Mr. Stanmore's great fat coachman with the powdered wig. This surprised that worthy individual at first, but he soon got used to it, and began to look out for "the queer little gal," and was disappointed when he did not see her.

Mr. Stanmore caught her at her conference, more than once, but he was too stern-looking to invite confidence, and too much occupied with his own dark thoughts to address her. Presently, Mrs. Stanmore was better—then, as well as she ever could be in this world, and Mr. Stanmore came with his good-tempered face again.

He found time to call to his recollection the figure of little Avice, as she had stood on tip-toe looking up at the coachman, and condescended to make inquiry concerning her, and even spoke to Avice about it, when he met her one morning in the board-room, early.

What a nice government secretary he was!

"So, my little Miss, you must inquire after Mrs. Stanmore," he said, drawing off his gloves, "don't run away. Now, why were you so interested in Mrs. Stanmore, eh?"

"I heard that she was ill, Sir. I like to know how people are, when they are ill. I had a father that was ill, and died, Sir!"

"Indeed! Do you know my little girl—Avice, I think they call you—that you are quite a character?"

"Am I, Sir?"

"Oh! no doubt of it."

"*She* is well now, I hope, Sir?" asked Avice, timidly.

"Pretty well, thank you," he said, musingly.

He unlocked his desk, and Avice softly stole away. After she had gone, he muttered to himself, "Queer," (his coachman had arrived at that conclusion before him), and commenced writing, and thought no more of her for the rest of the day.

Avice had fewer opportunities of seeing the handsome secretary—and he was very handsome—after that, for Martha Badge, one Monday morning, took her by the hand, led her down some turnings, at the back of Parliament Street, knocked at the door of a shabby-genteel private house, on which was affixed a brass plate, with "Mrs. Wrickerton's Establishment for Young Ladies," engraved in very large letters thereon, and had an interview with Mrs. Wrickerton herself, an old lady, in a cabbage-green merino, who could have been blown away by a strong puff of wind, she was such a very weak, shaky, thread-paper looking mortal.

"This is a gal's school?" asked Martha, coming to the point at once.

"Yes, Ma'am—will you take a seat, Ma'am? take a seat, my little dear."

"The child wants edicating, and will be called for every morning and afternoon—she belongs to Mr. Hern, of the — Office, at the back of Whitehall, and he can't afford too high a bill, and too many books. Good morning!"

Mrs. Wrickerton, bewildered by this unceremonious entrance and exit of Mrs. Badge, gasped, for some time, in mute surprise, and then took Avice, in a dreamy manner, to the school-room, and introduced her to a host of children, ranged on a series of long, wooden forms.

Mrs. Wrickerton also introduced Avice to Miss Wrickerton, a pale, thin, diminutive woman of forty, who was leaning back in a low-pillowed chair, and regarding our heroine with two little sharp, grey eyes.

"Sit down, Miss Hern," said Miss Wrickerton, "we will attend to you presently."

Avice Hern had soon an opportunity of discovering that, although Mrs. Wrickerton was the ostensible governess, her invalid daughter evidently did all the work—wrote the first lines in all the copy-books, and superintended all the hard lessons, the fragile mother contenting herself with hearing the fifth form—the one-syllable class—and occasionally blundering over that.

There was a great deal of scolding going on, and Miss Wrickerton had a shrill, piercing voice, which smote to the hearts of the small offenders, and had an unpleasant habit of smartly rapping the desk, with an ebony ruler, which necessitated many nervous jumps in the air from weak-minded pupils.

Miss Wrickerton, after ignominiously dismissing a geography class, of large proportions, that was sadly out in “principal mountains,” summoned Avice to her desk, and asked several questions as to her capabilities, keeping those “funny grey eyes,” as Avice afterwards termed them, in confidence, to Mrs. Badge, fixed upon her during the whole of the examination.

She was not a very severe lady, after all, for she patted Avice on the head with a thin, kite-like hand, and hoped she would be a good girl, and learn her lessons accurately, with both of which injunctions Avice faithfully promised to comply.

And Avice kept her promises, and got top of the class on the very first morning, and received a pasteboard ticket, which was equivalent to a good mark, and which was to count towards a prize at the end of the half-year.

Avice put that ticket in her “Savings’ Bank,” and the ticket she got in the afternoon, together with the tickets for the remainder of the week, till the “Savings’ Bank” would not hold any more, and began to bulge ungracefully.

Avice liked school-life, liked her school-fellows, liked Mrs. and Miss Wrickerton, although the latter was sharp sometimes, and even scolded her.

She got a prize at the end of the half-year, though, and a rare heap of tickets she had to show for it; it took half-an-hour for Miss Wrickerton to count them, and another quarter-of-an-hour for Mrs. Wrickerton to put them back in the ticket-box, for she kept dropping them through her fingers and dropping more in stooping to pick them up.

And what a prize it was! A crimson cover, and shining

gilt edges, and emblazoned sides—a book of fairy tales, dear, delightful, never to be forgotten stories of fairy land.

When the prize was put into the hands of Mrs. Badge, she disparagingly turned it from side to side, and said :

“ I wonder Mrs. Wrickabone (Martha Badge was never a good hand at proper names ; she called Mr. Stanmore ‘ Sternbore,’ and Lowry ‘ Soury,’ in private conversation) couldn’t think of something better to put into children’s hands than a parcel of rubbishing, nonsensical fairy books—what good can they ever do, I should like to know ! ”

“ The imaginative faculty ought to be stimulated and encouraged, so Miss Wrickerton says. She thinks these pretty tales do, taken in moderation, as much good as those heavy books of facts, and I shouldn’t wonder. Oh, you should hear her explain them, Mrs. Badge.”

“ Stuff, a pretty piece of fine talk to put into children’s mouths, I’m sure. But read the book, if you like. You’ve *gallied* your poor brains hard enough to get it ! ”

There was a tea-party at Mrs. Wrickerton’s on the last day of the half-year, and mother and daughter came out in bran new characters, and astonished Avice.

They set aside their grave dictatorial airs, and were very merry, the old lady playing at blind-man’s-buff, and peeping over the top of the handkerchief, and declaring she could not see a bit, and Miss Wrickerton, in her pillowed chair, in one corner, shrieking with laughter, and pressing her thin hands against her sides to keep herself within bounds, and avert all serious consequence.

Avice remembered the merry faces, on that happy evening, long after she was a woman, and — no matter what ! She recollected every name of her schoolfellows, and often wondered where they had all got to, and how many were married or dead. We all do that. School remembrances are not to be lightly thrown away. How many times do we catch ourselves poring over our ledgers, our books, and our MSS. thinking of Jack this, and Tom that, whom we have not seen since they were boys—not since that “ jolly fight,” perhaps, which we had out in the play-ground, or in the street at the back, with the potman and butcher for umpires.

Avice obtained some precious information that evening, from Fanny Barnett, whose father was a lawyer’s clerk, which heightened her respect for Miss Wrickerton. Fanny

Barnett told Avice, in confidence, over a glass of home-made lemonade—which had hardly cooled, and was rather thick, but oh ! so nice—that Miss Wrickerton might come into property some day, which a distant relative had bequeathed many years ago, and which had been unfortunately contested by adverse parties who had made a Chancery suit of it, and kept her out of it ; that Miss Wrickerton, poor as she was now, might make a lady of herself and mother, and keep a beautiful carriage to ride about in, and save her hiring that odious chair, on wheels, in which Sam, the errand boy, took her about St. James's Park, by special permission of its rangers, and with the sanction of the Woods and Forests.

All this, when Miss Wrickerton came into her Rights. So, whilst she waited for them, she kept school, and was content.

Waited ! Are we we not all waiting in a great ante-room for something ?—for advancement in life, for new hopes, and their fulfilment, for a wife, for a child, for a grandchild, for a grave ? Always waiting in the cold, silent vestibule for our Rights, or our Wrongs ; for each revolution of the ever-whirling wheel of fortune that is turning up here a prize, and there a blank ; or ever wondering what will come next, and to whose share it will fall.

What is Avice waiting for amidst the crowd of loiterers, standing on the threshold of Life in her black dress, with the first prize in her hands ?—that fairy book—full of no more marvellous stories than are heard of, hour by hour, on the dirty back stairs of every-day history !

BOOK II.

Barbarigo. 'Tis hard upon his years.

Loredano. Say rather

Kind to relieve him from the cares of state.

Bar. 'Twill break his heart.

BYRON'S "TWO FOSCARI."

Act IV. Scene I.

CHAPTER I.

T E A - P A R T I E S .

Two years have passed since the curtain was dropped on Avice Hern and her fairy book. There is but little change to chronicle. James Hern has the same stoop, the same care-worn, shrivelled face, and has his rheumatics every winter sent him punctually, beginning about the fifteenth of November, and keeping on till spring. As regular in calling, or in giving notice of his whereabouts, is a certain Walter Hern, the pensioner upon his old father's scanty purse—a man ever hulking about the streets, fighting in low public-houses, hanging about corners of courts and lanes, with men as degraded as himself. Although he has called at the office, he has had no further interview with his father, that Martha Badge or Avice is acquainted with, neither has there been any sign of a return of fifteen pounds, lent one winter's night. When he has made a call at the office, Martha Badge has met him in the hall, thrust a little bag into his hands, seen him to the steps, and banged the door upon him savagely.

Avice has grown a few inches taller, but still retains her dusky gipsy face, and is far from a pretty child, for all those large black eyes of hers. Regularly, twice a day, does she cross the bustling road in Parliament Street with Mrs. Badge, and wend her way to Mrs. Wrickerton's Establishment for Young Ladies, wherein Miss Wrickerton, the invalid, still lingers for her Rights. Cushioned deeply within the leathern chair, she bears the long duration of her malady with exemplary fortitude, and taps the desk as sharply with her ebony ruler, and is as quick in warning pupils of stray glances, and of inattention paid to letters, as at the time when Avice won her first prize with the crimson cover and gilt leaves.

Avice has won a prize each half-year since the date of that occurrence, and is a chief favourite of Miss Wrickerton's. Miss Wrickerton has a foible common to the autocracy of

schools : she indulges herself with a favourite. We suppose schoolmasters and schoolmistresses cannot help this failing. Can we—weaker-minded beings that we are—help selecting the favoured one, and setting store by him or her? We all choose our favourites in life, foster them in the early days of our friendship, and pet and spoil them, till sometimes they turn and sting even *us*!

For this reason, Avice has not so many school friends as might be expected from her quiet, unselfish ways; and the more she gains on Miss Wrickerton, the greater alienation she experiences from her little contemporaries. Avice has very few friends in the seminary; she wins many prizes, and deservedly wins them, for all the elder pupils' sneers; she is old-fashioned, it is whispered, and such a prim little fright, too, that they can see "old-maid" written on her already, and there is a prophecy current in the school that she will keep a tom-cat and a parrot at thirty, and have a weak back, and a chair and pillows, like Miss Wrickerton.

There is another person who gives herself "airs" whenever Miss Wrickerton invites Avice to a quiet cup of tea with her and her mother—and Miss Wrickerton does so far unbend to her pupil very often—and that is Mrs. Martha Badge. Mrs. Badge has a peculiar way of giving herself "airs," too: she answers everything in monosyllables; she listens to Avice's recital of the events of the evening spent with Miss Wrickerton, but indulges in a cold, stony stare at the opposite wall, and, at each mention of the giver of the feast, up jerks the face of the old lady in a contemptuous manner. After Mrs. Badge has received several statements to the same purpose, with a deportment equally freezing, Avice conceives an inkling of the truth, and says one day:

"Don't you like Mrs. Wrickerton, Mrs. Badge?"

"Never saw the woman."

"Then you cannot dislike her, *can* you?"

"Can't say."

"Perhaps," suggested Avice, wistfully, "you do not like my staying to tea with Miss Wrickerton?"

Mrs. Martha is at needlework, and makes no answer.

"Is that it, Mrs. Badge?" persists Avice.

"What should I care about it? It saves *me* trouble, don't it?"

"Because, if you had any objection, I would not stop—indeed, I would not."

Martha Badge reflects, and, at last, makes answer :

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

"Do you *like* staying to tea there? Haven't you had enough of her all day, Avice?"

"I like Miss Wrickerton. She is very kind to me."

"Then go, my dear, go!" bursts out Martha. "God forbid that I should wish to balk you of any pleasure, old, and cross, and sour-tempered as *I* am. I only thought, Avice, that you were forgetting Mrs. Badge; and that," with a grunt, "is easily done, ain't it?"

"Oh! no, no!" says Avice, flinging her arms round the stiff old neck, "now I am used to your ways, I know what a dear, good heart you've got—I knew it long ago!"

"Bless me! bless me, child; you'll break my spectacles!" cries the alarmed housekeeper. "How very sudden you are, Avice! God bless me! tell me when you're coming another time, do, my dear—you've quite upset me! There, come to school—it's nearly two o'clock."

Mrs. Badge puts down her work, takes off her glasses, and prepares to see Avice to the door of the Wrickerton establishment.

"And if I'm asked to tea, and Miss Wrickerton has baked her little cake on purpose——"

"Cake! is it hot?" is Mrs. Badge's curious inquiry.

"Yes, hot cake, and so many currants! Shall I stop, Mrs. Badge?"

"If you like, Avice."

But Avice receives no invitation to tea, and Betsy, the aide-de-camp, fetches her from school to the house near Whitehall.

Martha is very important till her own tea is ready, and keeps walking into the back kitchen and out again, whilst Avice sits in the window recess under the cage of the old canary, learning her lessons for the morrow, and puzzling her head as to the reason for a constant slamming of the oven door in the great kitchen range.

Martha sits down to the tea-table at last, and Mr. James Hern wakes up from a doze he has been having "between the lights." When Avice is seated in her usual place, Betsy,

grinning from ear to ear, enters with a smoking hot cake, and triumphantly sets it in the centre of the table.

"What's that?" asks the grandfather, and "Oh, my!" exclaims Avice.

"I thought I would make a cake to keep my hand in, Mr. Hern. Do you see any objection?" inquires Mrs. Badge, with dignity.

"Oh, no—not at all! Cake, eh? how very strange!"

It is forty years since Martha Badge made her last cake, and Mr. Hern munches at a piece of the present one with grave intentness, and thinks his housekeeper is becoming childish; whilst Avice, who more fully comprehends the state of the case, looks at it with tears in her eyes, and understands honest Martha better than ever she has done in her life.

It is a dumpy cake—moreover, it is a tough cake; and Martha's hand, that has been a heavy one in the days of its youth, is a sledge-hammer kind of a hand now, and not *au fait* in mixing and rolling out; yet Avice risks indigestion, and eats unsparingly of the composition, and is not backward in praise concerning it, and Martha, who has had her serious doubts of success, brightens up, and looks quite cheerful.

On the next afternoon, Miss Wrickerton draws Avice aside, and tells her when Betsy comes she shall send her home again, and ask her to return in a couple of hours.

Avice hesitates.

"What is it? what are you thinking about?" says Miss Wrickerton. "Speak out, Avice. I like children to speak plainly—time enough for double dealing when they are old in sin and the children of wrath."

"Would you mind, just for once, Miss Wrickerton, asking Mrs. Badge to tea?" replies Avice, thus adjured.

"Who's Mrs. Badge, my dear?"

"She's my grandfather's housekeeper, and I—I think—although she would not come, I'm sure she would take it as a great favour, and not dislike m-m-my coming so."

"Dislike your coming! and why?" asks Miss Wrickerton, interested in the eccentric Martha.

"I—I think that—that she is afraid I shall get less fond of her, and neglect her, if I come to tea too often here."

"She's a good old soul, then, and we'll ask her to tea, Avice; and I hope she will come, too, and that's more," replies the little schoolmistress. "Mother, when the girl comes for Miss Hern, will you give her this note for Mrs. Badge?"

And she proceeds to indite a note forthwith.

Betsy is, in due course, dispatched back with the letter to Mrs. Badge, and that lady, suppressing her contempt for penmanship, puts on her spectacles, and sits down with a groan to decipher the contents. She masters it, at last, after much inward spelling, and drawing in of long breaths, and folding up the letter, says:

"That's Avice."

Miss Wrickerton and Avice wait some time for a reply to the note, which comes finally, in the shape of Mrs. Badge herself, clad in a rusty black silk, kept expressly for grand occasions, and which, in consequence, has not been before exhibited to the eyes of Avice Hern. Martha looks a trifle more bony and angular in state dress, and makes her respects to Mrs. and Miss Wrickerton with a solemn bob that causes much crackling of the silken garment.

What a tea-party it is! and how Miss Wrickerton, with consummate tact, worms herself into the good graces of Martha Badge, and draws her out. The invalid schoolmistress bears the reputation of being sharp and satirical, with an extra tinge of acidity for grown-up people; but they are enemies who say so—old ladies who have not been asked to tea, or very distant relations whose subdued kind of toadyism—based upon visionary hopes of Miss Wrickerton coming into her Rights some very fine day in the future—has long since been unceremoniously snuffed out. But to Mrs. Badge she is amiable, talkative, and quite merry, relating such funny little anecdotes that the hard lines round the old housekeeper's mouth relax, and the face breaks out almost into smiles. Miss Wrickerton devotes herself entirely to Martha, and consigns Avice to the tender care of her mother, who, obedient to anybody and everything, understands the look of her daughter, and amuses Avice by taking her up stairs to her own room, and showing her a parcel of old trinkets that belonged to her grandmother.

The two women left behind, take their seats by the window which looks into the narrow street, and talk of nothing

but Avice for some time—what a clever child she is, how shrewd and quick, and how she has won upon two old maids such as they are, and rubbed off the husk of unsociality which years have hardened round them !

Then they grow confidential, and Miss Wrickerton talks of her Chancery suit not very sanguinely, and of the many years she has kept school for her mother in that back street ; and of the cause of her weak back, and even hints, with a sigh, that if it had not been for that fall, she would have been married twenty years ago.

“ But I was only fit for a schoolmistress after my accident, Mrs. Badge,” she says. “ Affliction takes all the tender feelings out of our bosom, and curdles the milk of human kindness.”

Martha nods her head. Perhaps—who knows ?—she has had *her* love story once, and those eyes have looked fondly upon some one before they had got bleared with old age, and used to iron-rimmed spectacles. That *some one* who has gone on his way, and disappeared in the mists of the past, may have been smitten with the plainness of the gawky girl in the suburban house, which Mr. Hern rented when he was a junior messenger under government, and when she had the care of the establishment of weak Mrs. Hern, and three unruly boys. We all have our love story : why should Martha Badge be an exception to the rule ?

“ Do you like Miss Wrickerton ? ” asks Avice, as they walk homewards about nine o'clock in the evening.

“ Yes, she's a nice lady, and I must ask her back to tea one of these days, and—make another cake ! ”

CHAPTER II.

TROUBLE.

It would sometimes happen through Betsy having been sent on errands, or Mrs. Badge having a busy day of it, that Avice Hern was compelled to make the best of her way to and from school without the escort of either of those ladies ; and being a prudent child with a great respect for crossings,

the grandfather and housekeeper had not much fear of her heedlessness bringing any accident upon her.

Mrs. Badge invariably delivered two pieces of sage advice to Avice on the morning of those days, when pressure of office business compelled the child to go and return without a protector.

"You can't come to much harm," she would say, "if you take care of the cabs and omnibuses for one thing, and call a policeman if you're worried by boys or rude people, for another."

It happened a few days after the Midsummer holidays, which had been spent by Miss Wrickerton and her mother at the sea-side in humble lodgings over a baker's shop, that Miss Avice Hern was not called for at twelve o'clock according to established rule, and was therefore at liberty to make the best of her way home alone. There was a bookseller's at the corner of the street in which Mrs. (and Miss Wrickerton's) establishment was situated, an odd, squeezed-up shop, full of startling tinsel pictures, and penny murder-sheets, with copies of verses, and serial stories that ran on for one hundred and four weekly numbers, and comprised something awful in each; and here Avice was wont to pause with Betsy or Mrs. Badge, and criticise the contents of the window.

It was an old-fashioned, high-windowed shop-front; and Avice on that particular morning was standing on tip-toe looking towards an open book in the third pane upwards, arranged to catch the notice of giants and giantesses passing by, and who might feel inclined from page twenty-seven to step inside and borrow the volume for three days, or pay one penny per day extra, if kept over the time specified, as fully explained on the inner side of the cover. Avice could make nothing of the wood-engraving from that distance, and was turning away with the intention of resuming her walk, when she was suddenly caught beneath the arms, and was lifted to a level with the book that had attracted her attention.

"Let me go directly, you rude person," exclaimed the indignant Avice. "Put me down immediately, or I shall kick you."

Avice was lowered.

"Thought you were anxious to see the picture, Miss Hern—that's all," said a gruff voice. "Well, and how are you?"

Avice turned and recognised the man who had called two and a half years back at her grandfather's office. She would have known him anywhere : the features were so strongly cast, the eyebrows were so thick and black, and the eyes so glaring beneath them. He appeared to be wearing the same great coat, boots, and battered hat ; and his big hands looked as if they had not experienced the beneficial effects of soap-and-water since they had clutched at the bag of fifteen pounds.

" Ah ! you have forgotten all about me, I dare say."

" Oh, no, I have not ! " answered Avice, firmly. " You're the bad man."

" Complimentary," said the man, with a growl. " That's some of Mother Badge's teaching, for a sovereign. Well, you're looking about as ugly as ever, you are."

Avice hurried on. He walked leisurely beside her ; and, although the child increased her pace, and almost ran, yet one slouching stride after another kept him up with her.

" You're in a plaguey hurry to get away from an uncle you haven't seen these thirty long months," said he, enjoying the child's fright. " Come, ask me how I do ? "

" Please to go away," cried Avice.

" Well, you'll answer a question or two of mine, won't you ? and then I'll make myself scarce. I should like to know how my poor father is. I have treated him very cruelly in my time, little girl ; but I've repented now "

He affected to whimper, and made a show of wiping his eyes with the cuff of his greasy coat.

" You are mocking him, you wicked man ! " said Avice, growing more bold as she emerged into Parliament Street, and the crowd of strangers passing by took away all sense of loneliness.

" Upon my soul, I'm not," said Walter Hern. " How is he ? "

" He is pretty well in health, but weak," replied Avice ; " now go away."

" Wait a moment, do ! " said the man, suddenly becoming serious in his tone, and even respectful. " I really wish to know, girl. I'm not shamming ; and if I'm a bad son, I have my feelings like the rest of you. He's still there at the office ? "

" Yes."

"What a great house it is ! Mr. Stanmore is secretary there, isn't he ? "

"Yes !" briefly responded Avice, suddenly beginning to beckon some object from the distance.

"His room looks across the water, doesn't it ? Great men always choose the best prospect—it's like them. And they shove my poor old father into a place that's been a kitchen, or servant's hall ; and I suppose he sleeps in one of the garrets or cellars—*which* ? What are you beckoning at ? "

Avice continued to make rapid signs. After a moment, she came to an abrupt halt ; and her companion did the same.

"Mr. Stanmore must have a deal— What the devil *are* you beckoning at ? "

"I'm calling a policeman," said little Avice, looking him steadily in the face ; "and I think it will be better for you to go, Mr. Hern. He's coming across the road, you see."

"Why you—you—I'm hanged ! "

And, with this uncourteous expletive, he glanced at Avice, then at a policeman who really *was* coming, hesitated, suddenly wheeled round towards the street he had just quitted, and strode off, muttering discontent.

Avice said nothing to her grandfather about this incident, but communicated the full particulars to Martha Badge.

"The wretch !" said Martha, doubling both fists instinctively ; "the wicked wretch, we shall have him here again ! "

But days and weeks passed on, and no more was heard or seen of Walter Hern, till one Sunday afternoon, when Avice and her grandfather were walking round the garden, which skirted the great river. What a strange contrast to the house on either side, was that office which James Hern kept in trust for government ! There was an earl's town mansion on the left, so still and quiet, and seemingly out of place itself, as it stood fronting the dark Thames ; and a rich banker tenanted the slim mansion on the right, and gave dinner-parties thrice a-week, which kept the front road lively. And there between them, separating rank from trade, was the dead-house ; and the noble earl and the wealthy banker's neighbour was a poor clerk, who sat on the low stone wall of the garden, in his leisure moments, taking snuff.

"What a quantity of boats there are on the river to-day, grandfather," said Avice.

"People are fond of the Thames, muddy as it is," replied James Hern, who was in a meditative mood. "The Thames is the common highway for the great and the small, for the Guard's Club, and the errand boy's 'boat for an hour;' for the Lord Mayor's barge, and the two-penny steam-boats. Many a time, in my young days, have I—is that any one stopping in the middle of the river, and looking this way, Avice? How bad my eyes are getting—there, I mean?"

The old man shaded his eyes with one hand, and pointed with the other. Avice looked in the direction indicated, and beheld, seated in a black, grimy collier's boat, two figures, one of whom she distinctly recognised as the bad son of her grandfather.

Avice was too quick a girl not to be aware of the probable effect upon her grandfather's nerves, were she to divulge the fact which had startled her, and therefore said evasively:

"There are so many boats upon the river, grandfather—which do you mean?"

Before James Hern could reply, the occupants of the boat having become aware of the observation they had attracted were rowing towards Hungerford.

Avice related this second incident to Martha Badge, who ground her gums silently together (Martha had long since parted with her teeth), and said: "It's my belief, he wants to rob the house!"

"Oh, Mrs. Badge! I hope not so bad as that."

"There is nothing too bad for such a man, my dear," said Martha, vindictively; "if there was a bag of gold lying on this floor, and there was a man sleeping before it, and murder was to be done to gain it, that man would no more hesitate, or stay the falling of his knife, than I should hesitate about *scrunching* a black beadle!"

And Martha believed it, or she would never have drawn so true a comparison. Martha Badge's whole life had been passed in "scrunching beadles." There was no greater enemy to them than she, and they knew it; for oh! the confusion, the rapid scurrying away of shiny backs and sprawling hairy legs, when the enemy of their race stalked into the kitchen with a light, and dashed relentlessly amongst them! There was nothing to equal the scene in history, except the Massacre of the Innocents.

Martha was extremely vigilant for the next few days, and

examined the fastenings of the house after James Hern, when James Hern had unsuspectingly taken his lantern and gone to bed. This precaution on the part of Martha made Avice nervous and alarmed, and her dreams of robbery and murder lasted the whole night, save when she woke up once or twice in the darkness with a shriek, fancying a blood-red hand was stealing, stealing slowly along the coverlet to grasp her throat! Sometimes she would wake Mrs. Badge by her dream-cries, and that lady would come gliding into the room (for Avice had her own little room, now), to enquire into the cause, like a Lady Macbeth, going on for seventy.

But the feelings of alarm wore off, no more was seen of Walter Hern, and it was soon a fortnight since Avice had beheld him in the collier's boat upon the Thames.

When all awakened suspicions were set at rest, when the summer was giving signs of waning into autumn, when James Hern slept in fancied security, when Martha Badge snored as only Martha Badge could snore, and Avice, in her tiny room, was enjoying such a pleasant dream of Bernswood, of her father alive and well, and *breaking up faggots* as he used to do for coming winter fires, of Spot grown so fat and lazy, and of all the trees in the large orchard that belonged to Farmer Wilson, being full of fruit, red, brown, and golden,—the house was robbed!

It was robbed when honest men were sleeping—robbed defiantly—for the full white moon shone all that night—robbed by men who came in a boat swiftly from the opposite side, from the dens and courts of Lambeth, eluding the watchful Thames police, who were gliding up and down the river stealthily. Lurking amongst the flower-beds,—cutting through glass and window-shutter, and eluding iron bar and chain—passing into the dark, musty-smelling rooms with masked lantern and life-preserver, ransacking everywhere—scenting money, silver, and gold medals destined for deserving heroes, as wolves scent travellers in starving forest wilds—breaking open the desks in the secretary's room, and abstracting many articles of value, even Mr. Lowry's gold snuff-box, which he highly estimated—passing in and out unheard, unseen, gathering their unlawful spoil, and retreating laden down with theft.

It was James Hern himself who discovered the first traces of the crime—it was the poor nervous office-keeper who,

opening the shutter of the board-room, let the light in upon the ruin left by the robbers. Unconscious, for the moment, of the ravages committed, he opened the three shutters, raised a window to admit the morning air, moved half-a-dozen steps towards the door, then stopped suddenly, put his withered hand to his heart, and glaring at the table, held his breath with horror.

Papers strewn about—the waste-basket overturned, and its wicker side flattened in by some heavy heel—the desk of Mr. Arthur William Stanmore wrenched open, and the silver fittings gone—a gaping pocket-book lying on the carpet—the desk of Mr. Lowry split in two, and nothing left within but letters, pens, and sealing-wax—the presses round the room open in many places—all the chief presses, of which Mr. Stanmore kept the key!

“Oh, my God! my God! the place has been robbed!” screamed Hern, and then fell crouching on the floor, moaning as with pain. He was in the same position, and moaning still, when Martha Badge came in to seek him, and it needed all the housekeeper’s threats and persuasions to induce him to abandon his despairing attitude.

“Robbed—robbed!”

“I see,” said the stoical Martha; “we can’t mend it. Let’s go down stairs.”

She led him away, keeping a rigid grasp upon his collar, to prevent his sinking to the floor again, and they went from room to room of the house, followed by the pale and trembling Avice. There was the window open, the shutter severed, its iron case cut through, and one of the great bars that crossed the window outside wrenched from its place, and lying on the terrace; there were the marks of feet sunk deep in the flower-beds and garden path, marks which did not extend within, for the robbers had crept about bootless, like men thoroughly up to their business.

Still with the hand upon his collar, Martha led her master to his own parlour, and let him drop into his chair. He began to moan again.

“I am disgraced—I am an unworthy servant! Kill me! kill me!”

“Be quiet!” remonstrated Martha.

“He did it—he—”

“The least said is soonest mended, and

the better for your own good name," interrupted Martha. "Now, Avice, go to the door, and the first policeman you see, call him in."

He spoke no more, but continued moaning in a feeble tone, refusing the cup of coffee which Martha made, and urgently pressed on him. When a policeman, obedient to Avice's request, came slowly up the steps, old Hern looked sadly at his housekeeper, and when the door closed, he slid suddenly from his chair to the ground. Martha jumped up, and running to the foot of the stairs, called out :

"Avice! Avice! tell the man to run instantly for a doctor. I thought it was coming! Quick! quick!"

Avice, with streaming eyes and palpitating heart, delivered the message, and came running down the stairs.

Her grandfather was lying on the carpet, tossing to and fro, and moaning still, with Martha hanging over him, unfastening his stock. He was struck down by a fit.



CHAPTER III.

SUPERANNUATED.

THERE was terrible confusion in the government office, near Whitehall. Routine had hidden its head for the day, and the whole place was up in arms. The clerks stood in knots of three or four together, talking of the robbery, and arguing upon its leading points, and walking in and out of the room in which the thieves had effected their entrance, and staring open-mouthed at everything.

In the board-room sat Mr. Stanmore, with an air of bland surprise and placid indignation on his manly features, and Mr. Lowry was trotting round the table, very red in the face, turning over every paper half-a-dozen times, and entertaining a delusive hope that his gold snuff-box had only been mislaid.

Gentlemen from other offices, and high in them as Mr. Stanmore, and some higher, came to talk with the secretary upon the remarkable occurrence, and to expatiate with uplifted hands, especially those who had suffered from no loss, upon the growth of crime in the metropolis. Carriage after

carriage rattled to the door, and rattled away again; the clerks grew thirsty with long argument; the door-keeper told the story, with ingenious variations of his own composition, to those who condescend to give ear; and the detectives—trusty spies of our Familiar Inquisition—arrived in haste, and commenced business. They questioned everybody and examined everything, they measured the prints of boots in the garden soil, and the dents and bruises on the desk, and the sizes of the keys and presses, and carefully put away a piece of string that was foreign to government, and which lay upon the floor, and made a list of the missing articles, or as many as were, at present, found to be mysteriously absent. They questioned Martha Badge and Avice, and asked the doctor how long it would be before Mr. Hern recovered consciousness, and, at last, went away in a hack-cab to the police-court, primed with intelligence.

The talk was of nothing but the robbery; clerks thought not of poor James Hern, in his long fit on the parlour floor, and Mr. Stanmore, after expressing his sorrow at that calamity, forgot it in fresh arrivals—forgot even his “Times,” which lay flat, fresh, and carefully folded, on the green baize table.

James Hern got out of his fit in the afternoon, and was carried up stairs to bed, and two policemen came to sleep in the house for a few days, for the purpose of keeping careful watch on “the stable-door.”

Government put forth a startling placard the next morning, which was affixed to the doors of police-stations and covered every hoarding, and was sacred from innovating bill-stickers.

“ FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS REWARD ! ”

Five hundred pounds but to touch some one’s shoulder, and hold on till help came! five hundred pounds to know a face that may pass you twenty times a-day, and you in happy ignorance! Five hundred pounds!

Government can be liberal at times, and spur on the vigilance of the law with costly bribery. Five hundred pounds!—Gods! how the junior clerks and messengers licked their lips, and thought of it—of gaining six or eight years’ salary by a *coup-de-main*—a blow on the nose, black

eyes, and crutches, perhaps—but five hundred pounds as golden salve !

The reward stared everybody out of countenance—even Betsy, the maid-of-all-work, going home late at night, spelt it through, and got discontented with her position in society ; lank poets, mechanics, hard-working labourers, costermongers, thieves *not* in the job, night patrols who had a good chance—all read it, and sighed covetously.

There was a small note to the effect that two hundred and fifty pounds would be given to any person affording information which should lead to the capture of the offenders ; but no one cared for that—a mere sop-in-the-pan, and not even tantalising. It was the dazzling five hundred pounds for the capture of one or more of the offenders that struck home to English hearts.

Three days after the robbery, old James Hern came tottering towards his usual seat in the office, and received the congratulations of his cotemporaries on his recovery, and was nearly murdered by eager questioning.

He knew nothing about it—no more than they did—he found the house as they had found it in the morning—oh ! his head—please say no more.

The shock of the discovery followed by the fit had rather shaken him, for Mackins, a nine years' messenger, whispered to young Black, a junior, "Cranky," which emphatic declaration soon got wind, and spread from room to room by slow degrees. James Hern was not quick with his work after that ; he mislaid his papers ; he forgot his orders ; he made strange bungling in those accounts which were sent in to Mr. Stanmore for foreign postage, and summed up the total as 'Five Hundred Pounds'—the price of a robber's head ! His hand shook so that it could hardly hold the pen, and he would remain for hours in a dreamy stupor at his desk, apparently regarding the aforesaid Mackins with a fixed intentness which froze that gentleman's blood, and made him uncomfortable and nervous.

James Hern occasionally sought to slur over these shortcomings by a display of diligence, which rendered things a trifle more bewildering ; he became very tenacious of his dignity too, as office-keeper—a dignity which he began to consider was slighted by fellow-clerks.

One morning, a note came down from the board-room

whilst Hern was at his desk, almost crying over a tray of papers from which sundry documents were missing, and which he had carefully locked up in his own drawer, so that he might have them ready to his hand; a note significant of Mr. Arthur William Stanmore's wish to speak to Mr. Hern.

It had long been expected by every one in the office except old James, and he had no idea of it. Even now he walked up stairs holding by the hand-rail, perfectly unconscious of the shadow of coming events, and entered the room with his customary plodding step.

Mr. Stanmore and Mr. Lowry were at their respective desks, which were renovated, and in prim order once more.

"Take a seat, Mr. Hern," said the secretary, as he idly scratched a series of hieroglyphics on his blotting paper.

"Thank you, Sir, very kindly—thank you, I will. I'm hardly strong enough yet to stand long. Thank you, Sir," and he slowly sank into the chair.

"We have been thinking, Mr. Hern, of certain changes in this office which are necessary for the strict management of the business and a due regard to order, and which, for all that, and—so forth," began the secretary. "We had hoped, considering your great age and bad state of health, that you would have tendered us your resignation as office-keeper, and accepted your pension from the superannuation fund, saving us thereby this very unpleasant task: we are extremely sorry to have to prompt you in that request, Mr. Hern, and to beg you to resign at the Michaelmas quarter, and to receive our thanks, our warmest thanks, Sir, for the faithful manner in which you have discharged your onerous duties to the crown for nearly fifty years."

He said it in his kindest tones, he said it with a gentlemanly consideration for James Hern's weakness and susceptibility. He might have made known his intention by letter or through his chief clerk, Mr. Lowry, but with a kind forethought had trusted to a personal interview by which he could soften, so far as lay within his power, the harshness of the duty he had to perform.

Over the face, bent forward with respectful attention to each word, passed the deep shadow of the shock, the sign of the old man's comprehension of the secretary's wish, the knowledge that he was thought unfit for the office he had held so long, and for the government tasks he had studied

for nigh half-a-hundred years. He bowed his head more, and supported it by an attenuated hand, leaning his elbow on the green baize table.

"You understand me, Hern?"

"Yes, Sir," he answered in a low tone, "perfectly."

"In a pecuniary sense of view, the difference will be very slight, your great length of service making your pension nearly equal to your salary, and," he added, "you will now have an opportunity of getting to some pretty snug cottage in the country, and resting from your long toil—why, if you choose to come Richmond way, Hern, you shall rent a little house of mine, cheap enough, I assure you—what do you say, now?"

"You are very kind, Sir—thank you, Sir. It seems very strange," said Hern, in a murmuring voice, "my going away in my old age—I can hardly make it out. I used to fancy I sh-sh-should die in this office, and ne-ne-never be turned away! I beg your pardon, for being so sil-sil-lily, Mr. Stan-more," sobbed the old man, childishly, as he drew his great silk handkerchief from his coat pocket, and hid his face in its voluminous fold, "but I am such an old servant, and it is ha-a-a-rd!"

The secretary scrawled on the blotting-paper more than ever, and once made a movement as if to speak, but abruptly checked himself, and shook his head with the significance of a Burleigh.

The old man carefully dried his eyes, and rose to go.

"When do you think it likely my services will be no further needed?" he asked, tremulously.

"You need not leave the office till Michaelmas, Mr. Hern," said Stanmore; "but I—I think it will be necessary to appoint the new office-keeper—it will save you all trouble, will it not?"

"Thank you, Mr. Stanmore, thank you," he replied, moving to the door, "you've been very kind; but my heart was in the old office—upon my word it was, Sir!"

He produced his handkerchief for the second time, and walked with difficulty from the room, holding it before his face.

"Would you oblige me by seeing the poor old fellow safe down the stairs, Mr. Lowry?" said the secretary to his chief clerk. "I can't ring for the Orderly without wounding

his feelings more. I'm sorry to dismiss him, it's almost killing him, I think ; but there's no help for it ! ”

Mr. Lowry departed in search of Mr. Hern, and ran against him outside the door, where he stood, giving convulsive vent to his grief.

“ Don't be a baby, Hern, don't, it's all right enough—quite right enough ! ” said Mr. Lowry, shutting his words out in the passage by rapidly closing the door of the room behind him, “ you'll have nothing on your mind when you have left the office, nothing at all. Come along, let's go down stairs ! ”

“ It's my dis-grace ! ”

“ Pooh, pooh ! Come along, Hern, come along. ”

When they had reached the stairs, James Hern turned to go up them.

“ What is it—where are you going ? ”

“ They don't want me down *there*, you know. They—they make game of me behind my back—I'm sure they do. ”

“ Oh, fancy—fancy, Hern ! ”

“ Mackins calls me ‘ cranky ; ’ a whip-whip-whipper-snapper that has hardly seen more days here than I have years. I'll go up stairs, Mr. Lowry—don't hold my arm, I'll go up stairs ! ”

There was no help for it, and Mr. Lowry, with evident dissatisfaction on his visage, followed him slowly up stairs to his bed-room, and propped him carefully in the back whenever he threatened to give way.

He staggered into the first seat, and grasped at the air.

“ I feel so ill, Mr. Lowry—oh, so ill ! ” he gurgled out.

“ Good God ! how white you are ! Dear me, dear me, what shall I do ! Will you drink any water ? ” and he rushed towards an immense ewer, and tendered that graceful drinking cup to the grey lips of the old man.

“ Call—Mrs. Badge—tell her I want her, it's another fit ! ” and he fell forwards, heavily.

“ Mr. Lowry, frightened almost into a fit himself, and forgetful of his dignified position in the office, tore down the stairs, ewer in hand, in his consternation, and communicated the alarming news to Mrs. Badge, who was in the bed-room of her master before he had half-concluded his narrative.

Half-an-hour later, Avice came lightly dancing up the door steps, with her school-bag in her hand. In the windows

of the parlour, there hung the white signal of distress, a ghostly mark that Avice passed unheeded by.

The porter let her in.

"Don't go up stairs, Miss Avice," said he, tenderly, "go down."

"Why?"

"Mrs. Badge will tell you, I can't. She's just gone into the kitchen."

Avice flew down stairs, and into Mrs. Badge's arms.

"Oh, Mrs. Badge! what has happened? Oh, the blinds!"

She looked at the darkened windows, and remembered that old sign on the day her father died at Bernswood. She knew it all—she guessed the worst in the immobility of visage—the stern set expression upon the face of Martha, and, clinging closer to her, burst into such a passionate flood of tears, that the housekeeper hugged her tightly to her breast, as if to stay, by pressure of those faithful iron arms, the bitter grief to which she suddenly gave vent.

"Oh, grandfather! oh, grandfather! they have taken you away!"

"Not *they*, Avice, my child," said Martha, solemnly, "but One, whose will be done!"

God give us grace to say that prayer as truthfully and fervently as that poor ignorant woman, standing by the child's side in the house of mourning, to say "Thy will be done on earth"—as, we are taught, that it is done in Heaven!

CHAPTER IV

A CONFERENCE.

WHAT is one death in the city of London? Who is it that cares for the sorrows of one house?—a blank in the road. What, to the bustling world, streaming by, are its closed shutters, and drawn blinds, behind which grieve the desolate? No one heeds the three shutters before the shop windows; men pass whistling by; boys struggle and jostle before them; a German band plays next door polkas and quadrilles; and there is a fight at the public-house over the way!

There seems a still greater callousness when some subordinate official—such as James Hern was—dies in a public office. There the business goes on as usual ; there are no masked windows, save those in the area, or at the back of the house, which the friends of the one gone inhabit ; there are no signs of the Destroyer in the many rooms filled with the strangers.

The clerks jest and laugh and play practical jokes amongst each other, just the same (perhaps some one may allude to Hern, as “poor old chap,” in the course of the day), and make quite as much noise in slamming doors, and opening presses, and hum their favourite bits of music, and the last opera *morceaux* with as great a degree of relish.

What a contrast to Bernswood, and the cottage wherein another James Hern “departed this life !” There, Avice’s loss appeared to be felt by the whole village. Men met one another going to their field labours, and spoke of “poor Jem,” and recited the things he had done in the flesh, and the sports and pursuits they had shared with him ; men, coming from other villages, were told that Jem Hern was dead ; and many a pitying look was cast on Avice, when she stole from her silent cottage to Mrs. Podgis’s, next door—and on the Sunday, the whole village thronged into the little churchyard to see him laid by the side of the wife who had gone before in the spring-time.

But, here, how unfeeling and cruel it all was, thought Avice. No one took notice of her pale face, and red swollen eyes ; no one shared her grief but Martha Badge ; and no one pitied her but Miss Wrickerton—and in both, it was such strange grief, and strange pity. The pity of the latter was, naturally, more for Avice than her loss, and the grief of the former was a dry, tearless grief, that to others, who knew Martha less than Avice did, would have looked like hard-heartedness.

Martha Badge was all thought. She would sit at the window, with her chin in her hands, brooding so deeply, that half a dozen calls from Avice, by her side, failed to arouse her—she was seeking to look into futurity, and futurity gave back but its darkness.

Miss Wrickerton came to spend one dismal evening with Mrs. Badge. They drew their chairs close together, and, in

a tone evidently not intended for Avice's ears, began a mysterious confabulation.

"I am such an old, helpless woman in myself—she is no fit companion for me—I should crush all the youth out of her, besides ——" were a few words Avice heard Martha say.

"And I am so poor, too," echoed Miss Wrickerton.

Then, there was some talk about life insurance, money and a will, and their voices sank lower, and Avice heard no more.

After half-an-hour's conference, the conversation became less secret.

"And how long have they given you to remain here, Mrs. Badge?" asked Miss Wrickerton, in her natural tone.

"A fortnight—that's all."

"That will be Michaelmas Day, surely?"

"Yes."

"Ah! I suppose the new people come in then!"

"Yes, Mr. Mackins, of the office. He is to be married to-morrow."

"Why did he not wait till my grandfather was buried?" asked Avice, innocently.

"Poor child! who do you think cares for your grandfather, but yourself?"

"And you, Mrs. Badge."

"Ah, don't say that," said Martha. "I'm afraid I don't care much. I thought I should have cared more, knowing him so long; but I'm old, and cruel-tempered!"

"No, no," said Miss Wrickerton and Avice, simultaneously.

"Yes, yes," persisted Mrs. Badge, "cruel-tempered enough. I couldn't shed a tear, now, to save my life. There is a weight here," pressing her chest, "that keeps tears down!"

"And you will take my advice about *that*, now, Mrs. Badge?" said Miss Wrickerton.

"I shall do what I said!"

"But not in the office hours, will you?"

"Well, I think not. It's a long tramp, though."

"There's a sixpenny 'bus will take you all the way," said

Miss Wrickerton, "and Avice can stay with me till you return."

"Thank you," answered Martha, "I thought of taking Avice with me."

"It might turn out as well," replied Miss Wrickerton, musingly.

When Miss Wrickerton had been wheeled home again, Avice questioned Martha Badge as to the conference with the schoolmistress; but the housekeeper was not disposed to reply, and put her off, by saying:

"All in good time, Avice!"

Good time! would there ever be a good time again? It did not seem so, and her heart grew heavier, and her high spirits faded away. She stood by her grandfather's grave, in the crowded London churchyard, and knew it was not there; she read there but the sorrow of a life, and its end; she found no balm, or resignation, or heard of one hope held out, when she and Martha were in the well-known parlour again, that Sunday afternoon—when the grizzled canary began an unearthly chirping, as Martha drew up the blind, and they sat staring at each other, in their heavy, black hoods!



CHAPTER V

A NEW SCENE

AN author may be compared to Harlequin: he has the power of changing the scene and working tricks and transformations with one touch of the wand, and can finally send the evil spirits, the clowns and pantaloons, to the Caves of Gloom and Despair, and take all the good people to the Realms of Boundless Bliss, red fire and spangles. Harlequin passes lightly through the piece enacted, not doing anything in particular, but taking up the time, whilst the other characters are recovering breath, or putting on fresh rouge; so, for the same reason, the author, grinning, mayhap, behind his mask—discourses morally and prosily whilst he inwardly considers what tricks shall come next, and what incidents shall

follow, which difficulty finally got over, he dances off to the side-wings, waves his quivering bat, and lo! the scene changes, and the performance begins.

It was a handsomely furnished room in a mansion at Richmond. The great bay-windows were closed for the night, and the brilliantly-lighted apartment was occupied by two persons.

The elder of the two was a pale, handsome lady of some thirty three years of age, who reclined languidly on a couch by the fireside. Her dress was of a grey silk, secured at the throat by a small gold cross. She was reading, or feigning to read, from a handsomely bound volume, which her thin, transparent hands seemed almost too weak to support.

At the table, listlessly turning over a book of prints, was seated the second inmate of the room, a beautiful child of twelve years old—a fair-golden-haired girl, with a bright face, on which shone the roses of health—a face that afforded a strange contrast to the white sculptured features of the mother.

“Rosamond,” said the mother, in a low, sweet voice, “had you not better let me ring for the nurse? It is nearly nine o’clock.”

“You said I might stay till papa came home,” the child answered, with a pouting lip.

“But your papa is late.”

“I do not think he will be long, mamma. You expected him to dine at home, you know.”

“He has been detained, dearest.”

“But he will not be much longer now, mamma,” readily answered the child, “for he does not like to keep you waiting up for him. I have heard him say so.”

“Your papa is ever considerate. What book have you there, Rosamond?”

“A scrap-book, mamma. I wish you would put down that naughty work which makes you sigh so much, and let me show you these pretty pictures. I don’t much care,” she said, wearily, “about looking at them by myself.”

“Well, Rosamond,” said the mother, laying aside the book, “bring your chair by the couch, and show me the engravings.”

Rosamond seated herself by her mother's side, and commenced slowly turning page after page of the album, and pointing out the most attractive plates it presented. The lady glanced at them with an affectation of interest which did not even deceive that naturally unsuspicious child.

"There's the lodge bell ringing, mamma," said Rosamond, looking up from the book.

"Some one for the servants, dear."

"How late!"

Presently, there was a slight tap without.

"Come in."

A tall footman opened the door, and stood on the threshold.

"What is it?" inquired the lady, without raising her eyes from the book.

"It's a woman wants to see Mr. Stanmore, Ma'am."

"Did you not tell her Mr. Stanmore was out?"

"Yes, Ma'am; but she said as how her business was pressing, and as she had come a long way, she would like to stop till he came home."

"Show her into the waiting-room, Robert."

"Yes, Ma'am."

The servant withdrew, and left the mother and daughter together. The gilt clock on the mantel piece ticked on, and struck the quarters on a silver bell, till another hour had slowly passed away. The book of engravings had long since dropped from the rosy fingers of the little girl, and she had fallen into a calm, deep sleep on her mother's breast, with one plump, chubby arm thrown round her neck.

Mrs. Stanmore lay watching the innocent sleep of the child, fearing to disturb it by a movement. But the child slept too soundly to be easily awakened, and the grinding of wheels on the carriage-drive outside, and the rat-a-tat-a-tat that followed, failed to arouse her.

After a few minutes, the door opened, and a stout lady, weighed down by satin and velvet, came rustling into the room.

"Oh! sister, sister! Lydia, Lydia! How foolish of you, to be sure!" cried the lady, "to have that heavy

child sweltering you up so! Why haven't you more prudence?"

"Hush! Miss Stanmore, hush! you will wake my darling! Let me have her while I can. God knows how long it may be in my power to hold her thus!"

"Well, you know best, my dear!" said the lady, who was a woman of the middle height, with a broad, heavy-looking face, neither handsome nor ugly for forty years' wear, and on which the slightest resemblance to a certain government secretary was seen in happy moments; "it's not my place to contradict you, Lydia, if you will do it, and act rashly. I know what Doctor Olderman will say well enough, that's all."

"How are the Cliftons, Jane?" asked Mrs. Stanmore, anxious to change the subject.

"Oh! all well," replied Miss Stanmore, shortly. "Where's Arthur?"

"Not home yet."

"I'm very tired—I think I shall go to bed."

"Do, Jane."

"I suppose you *will* sit up, and will *not* give the child to Mary?"

"I am happy, and I am sure the child is, Jane; do not disturb us."

"Good night, then. Oh! how tired I am!"

After crossing to the couch, and exchanging a snipping kind of kiss with her sister-in-law, and dropping a second chaste salute on the cheek of her niece, Miss Stanmore took her departure.

Half-an-hour's silence in the room—the child still slumbering. Mrs. Stanmore, suddenly remembering the woman in the waiting-room, gently touched the silken bell-rope.

The tall footman reappeared.

"Is that poor woman waiting now, Robert?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"A sort of old woman, in deep mourning, Ma'am."

"Deep mourning? poor sufferer! left to mourn some loved one whom God has taken from thee!"

"Eh! Ma'am?"

"You may ask the woman to step this way, Robert."

"Yes, Ma'am."

In compliance with his mistress's request, Robert quickly ushered into the room the gaunt figure of Martha Badge, followed at a little distance by the timid Avice.

Whether it were fright at the position in which she was placed, or that her nerves had been unstrung with recent sorrows or affliction, it is certain that Avice staggered more than once, and finally made a plunge at the black skirts of Martha, to save herself from falling.

"Sit there, Avice," said Martha, pointing to a vacant chair.

Avice complied with this request, keeping her large black eyes fixed on Mrs. Stanmore and the sleeping child.

"Your little girl seems weak," said Mrs. Stanmore, in a kind tone, to Mrs. Badge.

"She is only frightened, Mum," responded Martha, dropping a stiff courtesy.

"My servant tells me you have been waiting some time for Mr. Stanmore," continued the sick lady; "if I can be of service to you in his place, or inform him of the nature of your business, it may save you hours' delay."

"Mr. Sternbore is not yet expected home then, Mum?" inquired Martha.

"The time of his return is very uncertain."

Martha stared intently at the carpet, and bit at the top of her fore-finger with grave deliberation.

"I don't know but what I may do better, lady, in placing my case before *you*," said Martha, at last, "and in trusting to you to plead my cause, and take an interest in it."

"Is it a just one?"

"Yes, lady."

"You need not fear my interest, good woman. Your child has a bad cough."

"Cough!" cried Martha, turning anxiously to Avice, "I've never noticed it. Did you cough, Avice?"

"Just now," replied Avice, faintly, "I had it coming along, Mrs. Badge. It's not a very bad cough, though. Don't mind me, please."

"I thank you kindly, Mrs. Sternbore," said Martha, re-

suming the original topic, "for the words which help me to go on."

"Continue."

"Have you ever heard of James Hern, lady?"

"I cannot say I have."

"Well, it is not likely," said Martha, "not likely that Mr. Sternbore should tease you at home with tales of the old office—that office in which James Hern worked for nigh upon fifty years."

"A long service."

"Truth, Mum, it was," said Martha; "for over thirty had he been office-keeper, and though its cares and 'sponsibilities worried him old before his time, he never shrunk, Mum—he never shrunk."

Mrs. Stanmore listened with more attention.

"Well, he died!" continued Martha, after a quick glance in the direction of Avice. "Mr. Sternbore, as I larnt afterwards, proposed to superannuwate him, and that brought on his old fits, and killed him. Not but that I think Mr. Sternbore meant it kindly; yet he—he didn't know James Hern. He died, leaving behind him a grandchild, an orphan, with but an old woman—that's myself, Mum—to take care of her, to fight the world for her, to do her duty by the child."

"You will be rewarded for such duty."

"I pray the Lord I may," said Martha, "even on earth. I pray the Lord that Mr. Sternbore will remember the old housekeeper, and make what she desires to do an easy task for her."

"Is it in his power?"

"It is in the power of every rich man—more especially in his."

"That is the child?"

"Yes, Mum."

"If—did you speak, little girl?"

"I—I did want to say a word."

Martha, fearful of some strange remark of Avice's counteracting the effect of the interest she had awakened, made a sign to Avice, but Mrs. Stanmore gently interposed.

"Let her speak," said the lady, "I am fond of children. This daughter here," fondly pressing Rosamond still closer

to her breast, "endears me to all innocent youth. What were you about to say, my little girl?"

"That—that Mrs. Badge need not talk like she does," said Avice; "that I shall soon be a young woman—just a few years—and able to work for my own living, and to help her. I think I could do it now; for there's two little girls, a year younger than I am, who go out for sixpence a day near Mrs. Wrickerton's; and I'm sure I could nurse a baby if it wasn't very heavy."

A faint smile passed over the delicate features of Mrs. Stanmore, which was immediately changed to an expression of concern as a violent fit of coughing followed Avice's defence. Rosamond woke, sat up, and gazed round her with a bewildering expression. "Who are these people, mamma? Do I know them? What a bad cough that little girl has."

"There's a box of lozenges on the table by the window," said Mrs. Stanmore. "Go and give the little girl one." A second thought made her hesitate. "Stay, give the box to this lady, Rosamond."

"It's nothing catching, Mum," said the quick Martha, "I've had my experience in ailments, and knows them at a glance. It's no whoop; she's caught a cold, that's all."

Rosamond, more fearless than her mother, had already disregarded the revocation of Mrs. Stanmore's edict, and was standing by the side of Avice.

Mrs. Stanmore watched the children with a nervous anxiety that was almost painful, and Martha, detecting the cause, took Rosamond by the hand, and led her gently to the side of her mother's couch again.

"It's as well to be careful," said Martha Badge, "some people think colds are catching, and one can't be too particular over such flowers as these are."

"I am somewhat nervous," said Mrs. Stanmore, half apologetically; "I do not think there is anything to fear. Will you continue your narration? What do you propose for the alleviation of your distress?"

"Not distress, lady," said Martha, with dignity, "save the distress of the heart; it hasn't come to *that* yet. James Hern has left somewhere about a hundred pounds for his grandchild, due on an insurance of his life. He could have left more, had it not been for a wicked son, who

drained him of his hard earnings year by year. Added to this hundred pounds, Mum, there is a sum very nearly like it, lodged in a bank near St. Martin's Lane, which is the property of Mrs. Badge—myself, Mum, as you see before you. That makes two hundred pounds in all."

"Certainly."

"That money I would sink to teach Avice some good business or make a governess of her—for she's a wonderfully sharp and clever child—so that when I die—and I'm marching on to seventy—she may have her talents at her finger ends, and not be helpless in the midst of this hard life."

"But you?" inquired Mrs. Stanmore.

"This is the point we're coming to," said Martha, "if I do that, as I stand at present, I must starve. I'm too old to please people with my work, or to get another place, never having been, as a girl, clever at sewing or stitching; and people don't like old frights wandering about their houses, and very proper, too. I could mind the office, if they'd let me, but that's not allowed; and so I thought if Mr. Stanmore could put me in an alms-house—I hear he has some appointments that way in his gift, founded by his father's father somewhere in the country—I'd take it kindly of him, and then I could do my duty better by poor Avice here."

There was a long silence. Mrs. Stanmore spoke at last.

"You did not save and gather together your hundred pounds by a life-time of toil and privation, looking forward to an alms-house as the resting-place for your old age, unselfish woman?" said she, warmly. "God be thanked! it is in our power to do something better than that."

"I do not wish it, Mum," replied Martha, firmly. "I am seeking but peace of mind, and in the country—I have hardly seen it in my life yet—I should find it, if Avice was provided for."

"But I should be alone, and never see you, Mrs. Badge," pleaded Avice from the chair.

"I'm an old woman, Avvy; what will that matter, but for a day or two at first? Besides, you would have your holidays, and then you could come and see me, and spend them with me if you liked."

"Only in the holidays!"

"We haven't got the alms-house yet, Avice," said Martha. "All this is talk at present."

"Have you any other proposition to make, Mrs. Badge?" inquired Mrs. Stanmore.

"Not any, Mum," said Martha. "I hope I haven't tired you with this. If you will mention it to Mr. Stanmore, and take the orphan's cause, which is God's cause, Mum—He says so in His Bible—you have an old woman's prayers and thanks to the last days of her life."

"I will endeavour to do my best."

Mrs. Stanmore rang the bell for the servant to attend Mrs. Badge and Avice to the hall door. In the pause which ensued, the steady, heavy pattering of rain was heard outside. "Is that rain?" asked Mrs. Stanmore.

"It sounds so, Mum," said Mrs. Badge, coolly removing her thick black shawl, and muffling Avice within it.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Mrs. Stanmore.

"I never catch cold myself, lady," said Martha, "and this mantle will be quite thick enough for me. I brought the shawl to wrap her in, coming back at night."

The servant opened the door.

"Robert, an umbrella for this good woman."

"I beg you won't do—" began Mrs. Badge, when the silent upraising of a thin white finger cut short the adjuration.

Robert departed.

Mrs. Stanmore lay looking intently at Avice during the time which elapsed between the order given and its fulfilment, and upon the servant making his reappearance with a large umbrella, she said suddenly:

"Mrs. Badge, that child must not go home to-night."

"My lady!"

"I could not lie in my bed, and know that I had let an ailing child go forth into the wet streets and the fierce rain," said she. "I would not let my own Rosamond cross the threshold of this house for fifty years more of life—and life is precious to *me*—and my duty to my neighbour, to my God, tells me I am no Christian, if I suffer that weakly child to face those dangers from which I would screen my own flesh and blood. The child *must* stop. We will find a bed-room for you both, and—"

"I am not yet out of office, lady," said Mrs. Badge, "and have many duties to fulfil in the first part of the morning. But if you *will* be kind enough to let the child have a bed in some spare room, or with the maid-servants, I will thank you a hundred times for your consideration."

"No thanks, no thanks!" murmured Mrs. Stanmore. "I will see she is taken care of, and will send her home by a servant in the morning."

"God bless you, Mum!" said Martha, unwrapping the cloak from Avice.

"But I do not want to stop," pleaded Avice. "I should not like to sleep in this great fine house, and leave you alone and—"

She began coughing again.

"You will stop, to please me, Avice," urged Martha; "see what a cough you've got, you silly child! I was mad to bring you out! There, there, good-night! You'll be home early in the morning."

"Let me go home now," pleaded Avice, "I would so much rather go home."

"No, no! they will be very kind to you. Good-night, my dear!" and Mrs. Badge stooped and tenderly kissed Avice; "and thank you for your good-will, lady, and God bless you, and preserve your own handsome child from the perils of this life, and bring her up to love you, Mum, with the same child's heart, when she becomes a woman!"

Mrs. Badge dropped another stiff courtesy, and stalked from the room, leaving Avice gazing after her, with two big tears in her eyes.

The head of Mrs. Badge suddenly reappeared.

"And which I forgot, Mum, to restore you to better health and earthly blessings; and if there's linseed in the house, if you will be kind enough to order a cup of it made into tea for Avice, just before she goes to sleep, I'd thank you. God bless you, Mum, again!"

And with this second benediction, all in the gruffest of tones, Mrs. Badge positively departed.

"Rosamond, *you* must go to bed now," said Mrs. Stanmore.

"Mayn't I see papa?"

"It is so late, dearest."

"Will you tell him to look into my room, then?"

"But you will be asleep."

"Oh! I shall *feel* he is there!"

"He shall come, then."

Rosamond, satisfied with this promise, suffered Mrs. Stanmore to ring for the nurse, and was led off, after many kisses from Mrs. Stanmore, and a "good-night, little lady," from Avice Hern.

When Rosamond had retired, Mrs. Stanmore, by an effort, sat up on the couch, and called Avice towards her.

"How old are you, Avice?"

"Twelve, lady."

"The age of my little child," said Mrs. Stanmore, musingly.

"But not so pretty," said Avice, quietly.

"How do you know that, strange Avice?"

Avice, after a harassing cough, replied:

"I haven't long, beautiful ringlets, nor a rosy colour, nor that white skin, nor those blue eyes."

"Do you envy her?"

"Oh, no! I would rather be Avice Hern."

"And why?"

"Because she will see Mrs. Badge to-morrow, and be home again!"

Mrs. Stanmore smiled, and laid her hand on Avice's head.

"Now, Avice, that cold will be better in bed. I hope you are not afraid to sleep in a strange house?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Will you sleep alone, or with one of the maids?"

"Alone, please, if you will wake me early."

Mrs. Stanmore rang the bell, and bade Mary be summoned, and Mary, a smart, pretty-faced waiting-woman, shortly made her appearance.

"Will you see this child to the spare room on the second floor?"

"The room which Master Clifton had, Ma'am?"

"Yes; and see that some linseed-tea be prepared for her."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I think I would rather Mary sleep with me, only I'm afraid my cough would keep her awake," said Avice, reflectively.

Mrs. Stanmore inquired the reason for her change of mind.

"Not for anything particular, only—"

"Only what?"

"Only I thought I might, perhaps, be ill in the night. I hope I shall not, but I don't feel—very well."

"I would prefer Mary sleeping with you, then," said Mrs. Stanmore, in a decisive tone.

Mary, who was a good-tempered girl, and fond of children, readily seconded the lady's wish, and a few minutes afterwards Avice was led up stairs into the grandest little bed-chamber, with the prettiest damask hangings and the largest looking-glass she had ever seen in her life.

Mrs. Stanmore sat and thought, after the retirement of Avice, and looked into the red fire with a deep and earnest gaze.

The grating of more carriage wheels—the long and loud summons at the door—the rapid tread upon the stairs, announced the arrival of her husband.

As he came into the room, he held up one finger in a reproachful manner.

"Oh, Lydia! sitting up, in defiance of all rule!" said he, "of what punishment are you deserving?"

He did not punish her, however, by word or deed, but sat beside her on the sofa.

"You are late, Arthur."

"I have been through a series of the most tiresome detentions," said he; "detained at the office—detained with the Secretary at War, at the Horse Guards—detained at the club by Sir John Barkland's long and confounded East India stories—I nearly tipped over his chair, and ran away; but I've reached home, at last, and thank Heaven for it!"

"We have had a visitor."

"Any of the Cliftons?"

"Why, are not the Cliftons at Sanderstone, and has not Jane been spending a week with them, Arthur?"

"Of course—of course!" said he; "why, I ordered the carriage to await her arrival at the London station myself. She's at home?"

"Yes, Arthur."

"And who is the visitor?"

"Mrs. Badge."

"Badge—Badge ! I've heard the name. Who's Badge ? "

"A housekeeper to James Hern."

"Oh ! "

His countenance changed, and a blank expression settled on his face.

"I see now—it's plain enough—another pensioner on our extensive list. Amen ! amen ! Well, how's Rosamond ? "

"Arthur, I have a cause to plead with you," said his wife, earnestly.

"Concerning Badge ? "

"Yes."

"Heigho ! what is it ? " and he lay back with an air of placid resignation.

Mrs. Stanmore recited the particulars of her late interview with the old housekeeper, and the sacrifice it was the wish of Mrs. Badge to make, providing she was certain of the future. The features of the secretary gradually awakened to an interest in the story of his wife, whose sympathy with the case heightened its romantic side.

"The alms-house can be soon settled, if she be determined ; but we will deliberate more to-morrow, said Stanmore, "she's a brave old lady, and I'll see what I can do. Did she bring the child ? "

"She is here now ! "

"What ! "

"The child had a severe cold, and it was a very wet night, so I expressed a wish that she should share the shelter of our roof for a few hours. Do you begrudge my charity, Arthur ? "

"No, Lydia, why should I ? " he said. "I should not have thought of the rain, or its effects upon delicate children ; but your warm little heart is ever scheming some good action. We men are hard, inconsiderate pieces of old granite—there is no feeling or affection in us. Ring for a light, and I'll just peep in at Rosamond ! "

CHAPTER VI.

TRANSPLANTING.

It rained furiously all the next day, and Avice's cold and grinding cough were worse. Mrs. Stanmore was too good a Christian, and too considerate a woman, to think of Avice returning home that day, and her liege lord was too great a gentleman to give himself any airs, because he, secretary to a government office, was entrusted with a missive to Martha Badge, its housekeeper *pro. tem.*

The letter solaced Martha, although she underwent the agonies of martyrdom in endeavouring to decipher it, and finally was compelled to give it up, and go splashing across the road, and down the opposite streets, to find assistance in Miss Wrickerton's powers of comprehension.

Mrs. Stanmore's letter gave hope of the alms-house, and did not alarm Martha with any particulars concerning Avice's ailments, although Mrs. Stanmore had sent for the family doctor to look at the little patient.

"Dear me, all this is very foolish," observed Miss Stanmore, petulantly, after the doctor had proceeded to the room in which Miss Avice still remained; "first, some ignorant person's girl in the house—although it's very kind of you, my dear—and then Dr. Olderman to come in his carriage to see her, tut, tut!"

Miss Stanmore was never very cheerfully or amicably disposed; of a naturally fidgety temperament, with a vast idea of her brother's importance, and of the share that fell to her own right, as his sister—with a small independence that would not allow her to live in the style she had been accustomed to, and which compelled her to accept her brother's house as a home—with an inward longing to have her own way, and never getting it, save by sudden dashes at the weakness of Mrs. Stanmore; she was not on the whole a very interesting companion for her brother's wife.

But Mr. Stanmore never studied *minutiae*—he had always lived with his sister, laughed at her ill-tempers, and cared nothing about them; why could not other people? He did not think of Lydia—his Lydia—being snapped up, or

brow-beaten in a mild form, whilst he was at the office, and as she never complained, he congratulated himself in having procured a fitting confidant for his poor sick wife. He was too busy to go deeply into anything which related to home; he had fine sympathies, a cultivated intellect, and deep feelings, but he seldom found them of use—they were rusting away in that mouldy old office, beneath the cares of business and the wet blankets of state; there came a time when the force of circumstance and the change of life called them into action. But I have digressed.

Mrs. Stanmore was lying on the couch, in her old position, and Miss Jane was embroidering a slipper—we cannot say for whom—but certainly not for her brother, who abhorred slippers. The rector of Sanderstone, at which village she had been spending the last few weeks, was a widower, wore slippers, *had* tender feet, and *was* subject to gout—there might be something in that, but for the world let us not be invidious.

"The child is ill," said Mrs. Stanmore, "and needs advice. I have sent for the best."

"As if the town apothecary couldn't manage these poor people," argued Miss Jane. "Well, Lydia, you always had such strange notions. I suppose that nunnery, in which you were educated, fostered all these peculiar ideas!"

"Perhaps so."

Dr. Olderman presently introduced himself to the ladies. He was a portly, dropsical gentleman, with bandy legs, very high in the profession, and much sought for, and admired.

He kept three carriages, an establishment larger than Mr. Stanmore's, and gave *such* dinner parties!

"The little girl is certainly ill, Mrs. S.—," he said, in answer to that lady's inquiring look, "I should advise her to remain in bed all day—the lungs are somewhat inflamed, and-um-ah-hum!"

"There's nothing contagious in her disorder, I hope?" asked Mrs. Stanmore.

"Oh, dear, no!"

"Then Rosamond shall go and sit with her."

"My DEAR!" exclaimed Miss Jane, drawing herself up, and in her astonishment letting fall the black velvet slipper, with the needle in it.

"Had not the child be better amused, Dr. Olderman?" quietly asked the invalid.

"Certainly, can't amuse a child too much, my dear Mrs. Stanmore," answered he, "all the amusement possible, of course, and-um. Good morning—good morning!"

And, after a sublime bow to each lady, he waddled from the room.

"My dear, you'll never!" said Miss Stanmore, picking up the slipper.

"Do you know what a day of sickness is without companionship, without a friend's face near you, without a consoling word?" asked her sister-in-law. "Do you know how wearily each minute drags on—a leaden link in the heavy chain, that bears down the day—and how cruel thought is in such bitter moments?"

"I don't know much about illness, thank God!"

"I do!" murmured the lady, "I have known many awful days of inaction. Rosamond can amuse the poor girl, you see, Jane."

"But the example—the *morale* of the thing, Lydia!"

"True, and—the Christianity of the thing!"

"Oh, there you go!" and Miss Stanmore gave up the point, readjusted her slipper, and commenced the top of a white mitre in Berlin wool.

So Rosamond, the little lady, went up the steep stairs to play with Avice Hern. Rosamond had fine notions for a child of twelve years old, but she had no companions in her own great house, and Avice was of her own age, and required amusing. Avice was not allowed to leave her room; she sat by the side of the fire prepared for her, with a hand clasping each sharp little elbow, and shivering beneath the sudden chills which came across her. She looked at all the pictures Rosamond had brought up in her lap, and thought them pretty, and much superior to those in the shop window at the corner of the street in which Miss Wrickerton lived.

Avice played for a few minutes at "shops," a game of which all children are fond till they grow great girls, and ride in their own carriages, or keep shop in earnest, or go out as apprentices to the milliners, and so forth, and then Avice complained of a head-ache, and they agreed to be quiet, and talk.

They talked of their schools, and each wondered. The

rich man's child told of her school, with its hosts of governesses, music-masters, singing-masters, writing-masters, dancing-masters, and riding-masters; and Avice had but to present, in contrast to all this, poor Miss Wrickerton, in her pillowed chair, teaching in her squeezed-up room on the first floor.

"Yet, what puzzles me, Miss Hern," said Rosamond, with an air of great perplexity, "is, how you managed to learn so much in so small a room! I don't know how many tried to teach me, but the more they have to try, the more they tease and worry me, and make me stupid! You seem to know so much, for such a little girl. I'll ask mamma whether I may go to Miss Wrickerton's—wouldn't that be funny?"

"But you are a young lady, and Miss Wrickerton's would never do, Miss Stanmore," said Avice, gravely shaking her head, "Oh, dear, no! Did you ever get any prizes?"

"Oh, never!"

Avice related all about her prizes, and finally entered into full particulars of their contents, and told Rosamond, between sips at a cup of linseed-tea, with the air of a connoisseur, all about the good and evil fairies, and the startling politics of fairy books.

Rosamond listened breathlessly; she had never heard such beautiful stories before, and when Mary, the maid, looked in upon them, Rosamond sent her down with an especial message, to the effect that she should stop with Miss Hern ALL day, and be good enough to send her dinner and tea up when they were ready, and take her love to mamma, and aunt Jane, please, and she was very comfortable.

Mrs. Stanmore was left to her sister-in-law all that morning and afternoon, and talked into a gentle stupor. She longed to see Rosamond, to hear her prattle, to hold her pretty head to her own aching breast; but she would not ask for her, and Rosamond was up stairs unconscious and quite happy. The mother lay on the couch till the daylight began to fade away outside, and the mist to rise from the grey water of the Thames and mingle with the rain, then, whilst Miss Jane Stanmore sat dozing by the fire, she rose, and went toiling slowly up stairs to the room tenanted by the children.

The children had grown bosom friends by that time, and had set aside conventionalities, and dropped "Miss" for plain, affectionate "Avice," and "Rosamond."

Avice abruptly ceased in the most exciting part of her tenth fairy tale—she had talked herself as hoarse as a crow—when Mrs. Stanmore entered the room, and Rosamond ran to her, crying:

"O, mamma! how could you come up so many stairs?"

"Well, Rosamond," said Mrs. Stanmore, kissing her, "do you like your new playfellow?"

"Oh, very much; she's such a nice little girl—are you not, Avice?"

Avice had too much modesty to reply, and, therefore, hid her blushes in the cup of linseed-tea.

"Do you feel better, Avice?" asked Mrs. Stanmore.

"My chest feels sore, and I have got a catching, Ma'am," she answered, "but my cough, I think, is better. It was very kind to let Rosa—Miss Stanmore, come and sit with me."

"I'll have my doll's house brought up to-morrow, Avice," whispered Rosamond, confidentially.

"But do you not hope that this little girl will be well enough to go home to-morrow, Rosamond?" inquired her mother.

"Oh, yes! I forgot that," and she looked at Avice wistfully.

Mrs. Stanmore sat quite contentedly with the children (she had not been so happy for many a day) till Miss Jane Stanmore came panting with affright into the room, and routed cheerful company, and pleasant thoughts.

"I thought as much," she cried; "oh, Lydia! what a fright you have given me—was there ever anything so foolish?"

"This is our little invalid," said Mrs. Stanmore, judiciously warding off the premeditated attack by indicating the presence of Avice Hern, who, perched on an opposite chair, sat casting sidelong glances at the lady.

"So I see," replied Miss Stanmore; "well, are you better, child?"

Avice repeated the particulars of her present state.

"Shouldn't wonder if it were a long 'bout!" said Miss Stanmore. "Heigho! what's your name?"

"Avice Hern."

"What an ugly name, to be sure!" ejaculated Miss Jane; "well, I hope you are very thankful for the kindness that you have received, child, and will remember this lady all the days of your life—and make haste and get better, do!"

"We can't make haste, Ma'am."

"Why not?" snapped Miss Stanmore.

"It is in other hands if you please, Ma'am."

"Hem! will you come down stairs with me, Lydia?"

"Thank you, yes!" answered Mrs. Stanmore, adding with a sigh, "I hope Arthur will come home soon to-night."

Mrs. Stanmore took the arm of her sister-in-law, who drew her slowly from the bright presence of her daughter, and escorted her down to the eternal parlour, and the wearying sofa by the fire.

Mr. Stanmore came home at a reasonable hour that evening, and brought a new book with him, which he read aloud to amuse his wife. It was a brilliant, satirical, political work, and, although she did not say so, she would rather have had him talk to her, a hundred times rather—than strain her faculties in endeavouring to comprehend the drift of the argument, and the depth of the meaning, conveyed in the flashing sentences of that erudite volume.

Whilst he was reading, Mary came into the room.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

Mr. Stanmore hated to be interrupted in his reading.

"If you please, Sir, I thought I would just tell Mrs. Stanmore that I don't think the little girl up stairs is quite so well."

"Why not, Mary?" anxiously inquired Mrs. Stanmore.

"There's such a catching like in her breath, Ma'am! It's worse than ever."

"Let Dr. Olderman be sent for immediately," said Mrs. Stanmore, energetically, "let one of the grooms go, and tell him if the doctor is absent from home, to inquire where he has gone, and follow him. Poor child, poor child!"

"I am sorry that she's so ill," said her husband, "where's Rosamond?"

"Up stairs, with her."

"Good God! Lydia—and you ignorant of—"

"Dr. Olderman has informed me that it is a severe cold, and slight inflammation of the lungs—nothing infectious."

Somewhat reassured, Mr. Stanmore bade the servant be speedy, and reopened his book.

In due time the physician arrived, and went up stairs, and stopped nearly a quarter-of-an-hour.

"The inflammation seems to increase," said he when he was in the room with Mr. and Mrs. Stanmore; "some one ought to sit up with her to-night, and my prescriptions had better be prepared directly, and—um—"

After some further remarks, he departed.

Rosamond went to her own room, and left Avice breathing painfully in her bed, with Mary, as a watcher, by her side.

All the long night no better—all the long day that followed, worse and worse, unconscious of the doctor, who came so often to the bed-side—of the face, that loved, grim old face of Martha, taking the place of the watcher's, for two hours in the evening, and disappearing with harder lines than ever, cut deeply round the mouth and eyes—of Mrs. Stanmore's hand, gentle as a mother's, sometimes touching hers—of the fine figure of the great man in office, who had asked about her spelling lesson—of her dear playfellow, Rosamond.

"If she goes! if she goes!" cried Martha, flinging up her arms, as she trudged back to the office, "I shan't believe in anything, in any good, in anybody!"

She looked up at the dark sky with an appealing gaze.

"Oh! take my old life, and spare this little flower!"

But Martha had no cause to lose all hope, or to weep over the last tie she had formed in her old age. After days of anxious suspense there was a change, and Avice began to get better. Then it was, that the true character of Avice asserted itself, and made a small heroine of her; then it was that she won upon the affections of those in whom she had aroused an interest. Ever patient under all her sufferings—never uttering one word of complaint, or giving the least sign of fretfulness, throughout the long days of her convalescence, but faintly smiling at those who were kind enough to come and see her, and expressing, by a gentle word, a look, a childish caress, her gratitude and love, even when she was too weak to raise herself from the sick couch, and too feeble to put forth a hand to take the medicine from the great, ugly physic-spoon.

With one exception, they all began to love her. Rosamond found more books, more playthings, to amuse her,

and had the great doll's house carried, triumphantly, to the sick chamber, when Avice was well enough to sit up in her bed, and see the wonders it contained. Mary, the nurse-maid, confidently believed she loved the stranger-child the better of the two. Mrs. Stanmore, despite her failing health, was helped up stairs to see the invalid, once a day at least, and her husband never went to office without putting his head in at the door of Avice's room, and saying :

"Well, my little Wildflower, how are you?"

Miss Jane Stanmore could not very clearly make it out, and worked away at the heel of her slipper with great diligence, and thanked Heaven the child would soon be well and gone.

The decision concerning the future of Martha Badge had not been arrived at, although the housekeeper had left the office, and taken a room over a small shop in Richmond town, in order that she might have an opportunity of seeing Avice twice or thrice a day.

One evening, Mr. and Mrs. Stanmore were alone in their usual sitting room. Miss Jane was at a friend's in the neighbourhood; Rosamond had gone to bed; and Avice, after sitting by the window all the afternoon, looking at the world without—ah! what a nice world it looks from the window of a sick room!—had imitated her example.

Mrs. Stanmore, after a fit of deep thought, said, in a low voice :

"Arthur."

"My dear."

"Have you determined upon anything for Mrs. Badge, yet?"

"Why, not exactly," said he; "the last time I saw her, I sounded the old lady upon a housekeeper's place in a gentleman's family; but she replied that, 'she was too old for work—and she felt that she could not do her duty if she accepted it.' The fact is, Lydia, she's bent upon the almshouse, and will take no greater favour."

"Not for herself."

"Eh?"

"Not for herself, dear Arthur," said Mrs. Stanmore, earnestly; "perhaps she thinks it might be weakening any advantage for the child, that we may have power to confer. I want to speak about this Avice to-night, husband."

"Go on, my dear."

"What shall we do for her?"

"What do you propose?"

"Shall we turn her into the streets when she is well—consign her to Mrs. Badge's care and counsels, and let the good old woman choose, in her helplessness, the path in life for Avice—or shall we, knowing her gentleness, her loving, winning ways, feeling the hold she has gained upon our hearts, take the responsibility, and make our home her own?"

Arthur Stanmore did not give an immediate reply, and his wife, laying a hand on his, continued:

"Without injury to the rights of Rosamond—our own dear darling; without intrenching much upon that wealth we have, thank God!—without doing harm to one living soul—we can alter the whole tenor of this child's life, and place her in a station that she will be more fitting to adorn. She has won on both of us, Arthur; do not let us cast aside the priceless gift of a pure affection. He who loved little children, will reward us for it!"

"Go on, dear Lydia, this is all so out of the common way, that I can hardly understand it—yet, let me hear your proposition."

"That we should send the child to a good school—say to return with Rosamond next week—defray all expenses of her education, in fact, adopt her till she is a young woman, and can seek her own fortune," said Mrs. Stanmore. "Then, you can place her in a fitting situation, or, if it please you, let her become a companion for my dear daughter Rosamond, an adviser, and a friend. Lying hear, I feel, dear Arthur, that we shall not have done this good work in vain. I know it, by the teaching of the Book, that no good work, however mysteriously hidden from us in result, was ever yet forgotten."

"It is our creed," murmured her husband.

"I shall have your consent, Arthur? I feel I shall."

"I will think of it—why should I refuse it? This Wildflower will not be a very great addition to one's family garden—but—"

"But what?"

"Rosamond's adviser, and friend?" said he, "and you—"

"Oh! Arthur, Arthur, *you know!*"

The face of the secretary darkened, and there was a rapid quivering of the lip.

"We have talked about *that* so many times, my husband," said she, in her gentlest tone, "and you have led me to believe that you are strengthened, and prepared for it. I shall leave Rosamond and Avice in good hands, and you will be to them both a protector—will you not?"

He tried to say, lightly, "Ah! I see we have settled on this new *protégée*," but his lip still quivered.

"Rosamond's religion is that of her father's, not of mine—it was his wish," continued she, "now, my wish is—protect Avice Hern. Bring them both up in the religion of the heart—there is no wiser, truer under Heaven. We have not been unhappy in our marriage, Arthur; diversity of faith, and pursuits—marriage of convenience, to suit worldly parents—have not shipwrecked us; and if our love has not been a passionate one, or a romance, yet, our mutual respect and esteem have not been uprooted; and this last act of ours will link us still more together! There, let us change the subject—you are looking sad."

* * * * *

Ere we pass from the childhood of Avice Hern, and enter the great battle-ground of womanhood, and of the trials it undergoes in earnest life, let us linger awhile with Martha Badge.

Martha is content. She says so, and there is no denial. Content to take the alms-house, far away in Essex, and see Avice once a year—content to part with the "flower" she has held in those horny hands, and folded to that withered breast—content, knowing what a bright opening is unfolding for her darling.

She comes one day, after all is arranged, and Avice has been told the result, to take her leave.

"Well, Avice, it's settled at last," she says, steadfastly looking at the grand-daughter of her old master sitting by the fire.

(Avice must not yet leave her room, Dr. Olderman says.)

"Yes, Martha—and I am so sorry!"

"Sorry, my dear, to be a lady!—to receive the education calculated to assist you in a thousand ways in life, backed by friends like these are!"

"Not for that."

"For what then, my dear?"

"To be away from you—to miss you for weeks and

months—to know when I come to Essex, that I must go away again for a year—a whole year! You, that are my own mother!” cries Avice.

“Hush! hush! Avice—don’t sob, they’ll think you are ungrateful if they hear you,” says Martha, in her huskiest tone, “you should never forget how kind their offer is—how truly generous they have been.”

“And Miss Wrickerton—shall I see her again?”

“When you are well enough, Mrs. Stanmore says, that you shall call and say ‘good-bye!’”

“And you are going away now—and this is *your* ‘good-bye!’”

“Ay, my dear Avvy—the sooner ‘good-bye,’ the better, for your weakness, and my old fool’s head that prompts me to flop upon this floor, and cry my eyes out. Now, Avice, listen to me.”

“I am listening, Mrs. Badge.”

“Your hundred pounds is lodged in the bank, and you can’t touch it till you are twenty-one,” says Martha. “There it’ll ‘cumulate and grow, and may, when you’re a woman, be a help to you. If, before that, you should want money, write to me, and I’ll send you another hundred by return of post—I shan’t want it—it’s of no use to me. There, will you have it now?”

“No, no,” sobs Avice, shaking her head rapidly to and fro.

“And Avvy,” says the old woman, her firmness giving way, and her words choking her in their utterance, “don’t forget *me*! Whatever happens, don’t forget me, or become too proud to come and see me in the alms-house—your old mother, as you say! Don’t forget me when you are a woman, and good, and clever; and I am in the churchyard! You cannot think how I pray not to fade out of one little memory—on-on-only one! God BLESS you, my dear, dear child!”

And pouncing upon Avice, she lifts her from her chair, and after kissing at her ravenously once or twice, sets her down again, and strides out of the room, down the stairs, through the hall, and is gone!

They part—each upon her way, and often looking back. Childhood upon the path hardly begun, dim and circuitous, and with unknown pitfalls—Childhood, with spotless white garments, fluttering in the spring breezes of Life’s Beginning

—Old Age, upon the beaten track, long trodden, and well known, with feet bleeding from the briars, and Winter coming on. Childhood and Old Age wave each a hand, and murmur each a prayer, and the waste between them widens as they progress—the roads intersect each other—and shadowy hands, like finger-posts, point onward to the travellers—"To Peace"—"To Sorrow"—"To Rights"—"To Wrongs"—"To Rest"—"To Life!"

END OF BOOK II.

BOOK III.

Time rolls his ceaseless course. The race of yore,
Who danced our infancy upon their knee,
And told our marvelling boyhood legends store,
Of their strange ventures happ'd by land and sea,
How are they blotted from the things that be

SIR WALTER SCOTT'S "LADY OF THE LAKE."

Canto III.

And wouldst thou court my lady's love, which I,
Much rather than release, would choose to die?

DRYDEN'S "PALAMON AND ARCITE."

Book I.

CHAPTER I.

THE HALL.

A HUNDRED miles from London, no matter whether east or west, north or south, there is a fair spot of English landscape, which we will call Sanderstone. Sanderstone enjoys a peaceful existence, and is free from wandering tourists, or fashionable visitors ; the Guide Books make no mention of its name, and county maps insert it in very small italics indeed.

The "foreigners" who honour Sanderstone village with chance calls, are few and far between : a stray pedlar, who trudges through without unstrapping his pack ; a melancholy-looking artist, with long hair and a meerschaum, who puts up at the "Bear" for the season, and goes wandering about, with his pencils and sketch-book, and is stumbled over at times in the oddest nooks and corners ; a sheep-drover bound for a market-town with his flock ; and that ubiquitous, ever-insatiable monster—with its one note of "more, more," like the greedy ogre of "Marvellous Histories and Adventures,"—the tax-gatherer, who jogs by once or twice a quarter, in his gig, and has evidently no taste for scenery.

Sanderstone is many miles from a railway-station, and the nest of cottages half way up the great green hill, offers no temptation for a branch line to enterprising directors. It is an inland village, although far-seeing peasants have been heard to declare that on bright sunny mornings they have seen the glimmer of the sea from Sanderstone heights. It is a village surrounded by all those attributes congenial to a romantic fancy : steep hills and rocks, dark woods, murmuring brooks, winding roads with cliffs jutting over them, stately mansions sprinkled here and there, and occupied by those who have little to do with the world of action, and who heed less the wild throbbings of the mighty Heart beating round St. Paul's.

The mansions, country seats, and palaces dotting the rich landscape, can hardly be considered part of the place bearing one general appellative, they stretch far away from the village and from each other, although from the breezy

heights just mentioned, one might hide them all with his outspread hands. Their addresses are "The Shrubby, near Sanderstone ;" "Olverton House, near Sanderstone ;" "The Hall, near Sanderstone," &c. ; and the "near" means a long drag along weary, dusty, up-hill roads—a fair mile and a half from the sloping heap of cottages half way on the hill.

It is of the Hall we have to speak in this particular chapter, and which we have come so long a distance to see ; the Hall of which a few words in the past tense are necessary.

The Hall has been for many years in a fearful state of dilapidation. It had been to let, to sell ; it had been advertised in the London papers, and occasionally gentlemen with cards to view had made their appearance at its rusty iron lodge gates, but no good had ever come of it. Fabulous reports of the price required for its purchase—thousands counted by many scores—floated about amongst the gossips ; fortunes required to restore it to a fitting dwelling-place, were spoken of ; flaws in the title, that held back speculators and wary capitalists ; complicated mortgages and deeds, the subtle net-work of the Law spread over it, of which the gigantic cobweb slung between the damp green columns of its portico was a fitting representative, were all suggested with more or less truth from year's end to year's end, till the house looked haunted, and the miles and miles of land beyond and appertaining to it, lay like a wilderness. Even the park trees looked sad and ghostly ; the park palings were falling into the road ; and the head-gamekeeper's hut, and the lodge, and the out-door servants' houses scattered about the estate, were all ruins, and beyond repair.

At last there arose a rumour of an intended purchaser ; of a gentleman who had lately inherited an immense fortune by the death of an Indian Nabob, his near relative, and who had bought the Hall through his agent's advice, resolving to come to Sanderstone with his son, and pass the remainder of his days there. The rumour spread, and eventually became a certainty ; workmen from London made their appearance, took up their quarters in Sanderstone village, went early every morning to the Hall, and returned at sundown tired and dusty.

Such is the slight history of the Hall necessary to the

development of this story, which takes up its thread six years since Avice Hern and Martha Badge kissed each other, and parted on Life's Highway.

The Hall makes little progress in repair, although its purchaser has become impatient, and is continually writing fierce letters denunciatory of everything to his agent; although the agent himself has arrived at Sanderstone, and taken possession of a suite of apartments at the Hall, in order to be an eye-witness of the work carried on, and the earnestness with which it is pursued. The Hall itself has assumed a more cheerful aspect; but the long, straight avenues, flanked right and left by giant elms, are still damp and miserable—the carriage-road to the house is choked by waving grass; the palings are still strewn about the country roads; the cottages are still black ruins—nothing more.

There comes another band of workmen, then another; and the "Bear" at Sanderstone, and the "Lion" beer-shop drive a roaring trade between them.

Still the great house engulphs the artisan, and the immense amount of labour brought to bear upon it appears lost in the waste of decay, although improvement struggles in the wilderness and silently advances.

The proprietor, maddened by impatience, startles Mr. Dovetail, his agent and inspector of works, by a missive of extreme significance, which briefly states that a portion of the furniture, &c., will arrive in about three days from London for the immediate fitting up of a half-dozen rooms, and adds furthermore, a request that preparations may be made for his reception, as in less than a month he shall trouble Sanderstone with his presence.

Mr. Dovetail is not a man of nerve, and the receipt of this intelligence shakes his little dapper frame, and creates havoc in his system. He runs about the house in an alarming state of agitation, gives wrong directions, countermands them, and gives fresh ones, falls over pails of white-wash in precipitately turning corners, and is continually going in and out of the kitchen, seeking for a Samaritan to give him glasses of spring water.

He summons a bevy of old women from the neighbouring village to scrub from morning till night at the rooms on the ground-floor, looking towards the dismal park; he bids the painters and decorators prepare to follow in their wake; and

he proceeds to concentrate his whole energies and his faculties of combination upon those particular apartments which may be speedily required.

The furniture, grand, massive, and costly, as befits a man of money, is in due course received ; and the rooms, smelling uncommonly new and damp, are fitted up, and await the coming of the owner. The housekeeper arrives—a short, fat woman, with a heavy, waddling gait, whose black silk gown and gold chain strike the char-woman into reverence—followed by the housekeeper's staff, consisting of the first division of housemaids ; the man-cook, quite a distinguished foreigner with a carrotty moustache, and a false set of teeth ; two footmen, fresh from London, with the finest calves ; three grooms on horseback ; two stable-boys, and some nondescript personages, who come in a cart.

Mrs. Mangos the housekeeper, and Mr. Dovetail the agent, hold a lengthy conference, and afterwards communicate to a mob of workmen their master's intended arrival at the Hall, and stimulate them to renewed exertion by promises and threats of great significance.

“The Ploughshire Gazette,” which embraces Sanderstone in its genial type, sharp as a needle in satisfying its readers' curiosity, or pouncing upon local news calculated to awaken it, sends its only reporter, a very shabby man in a black dress coat and mittens, to take note of everything appertaining to the Hall, and to send full particulars on each Friday morning, in time for the Saturday's publication, which particulars soon extend to the secret of the intended mysterious arrival of the proprietor (whose name, by the way, no hard ferreting of the reporter can elicit,) and of his desire to remain unknown or unacknowledged, until the final completion of the Hall.

Mrs. Mangos, about a fortnight after her arrival, receives a note as follows :—

“MADAM,
“We shall be at the Hall to-morrow ; ”

which being shown to Mr. Dovetail, again upsets his nerves and plays havoc with his mind's composure. The morrow comes, and a few hours before sunset, two horsemen gallop down the grass-grown avenue, and are received by Mr.

Dovetail and Mrs. Mangos beneath the renovated portico. The grooms, with wistful looks at their new masters, lead the horses to the stables, and the two strangers stand on the threshold of their new home, and look around them.

The elder is a tall square-built man, of about fifty years of age, with heavy features rendered somewhat more lowering by thick dark eyebrows, and a bushy black moustache; his companion is a young man of some two or three and twenty years, whose striking appearance necessitates a more critical description on the part of his biographer.

In stature this young man is equal to his father; his figure, although slight, is well proportioned, and is seen to full advantage as he carelessly leans against one of the columns of the portico, and flaps at his varnished boot with the thong of his riding-whip. The expression of his face is good, although a half-proud, half-moody look, shadows it at the present instance. The brow is high but somewhat narrow, and this appears to be the only defect in features otherwise strikingly handsome and perfect; the Grecian nose, the small red mouth, the rounded chin, are almost feminine, but the dark eyes have a flashing in them, which relieves the face from any tameness or insipidity, and the bronzed complexion, darkened as if by long exposure to a tropical sun, and the silky black moustache fringing his upper lip, give a masculine and striking character to his countenance.

"The place is desolate enough, Arnold," says the elder, as he stands with hands folded behind his back, surveying the grounds before him. "It seems as if all the mint of money thrown away upon the place had been buried in a hole."

"If you would—would just allow me to ex—" began Mr. Dovetail, who, standing a few paces behind, has heard the comments of the senior.

"He speaks to me, Sir," interrupts the young man sharply, "know your place and stand back."

"Ahem!" feebly coughs the agent.

"Dovetail, we shall not require your services yet a while," says the elder, waving his hand, "did you speak, Arnold?"

"There's many a month's labour yonder," says the young man, "but it's lost in the great place."

"Yes, yes! it's large, that's true," replies the other,

bringing his hands to the front, and rubbing the riding gloves in which they are encased one against the other in his exhilaration, "it's a large place, is it not, Arnold, eh?"

"Ay, large enough."

"Come, let us enter the house, and see what preparations they have made for us."

"I am ready."

The two men turn, and Mrs. Mangos, who has been patiently awaiting them in the great hall, curtsies, and then precedes them to the handsomely furnished dining-room.

The young man, somewhat selfishly, appropriates the soft springy couch, on which he flings himself with an air of utter weariness.

"You are tired?" says the elder.

"It has been a long journey—day after day—ride, ride, ride—we had better a thousand times have come to Branscombe by the train."

"A curse upon the train," growls the other, as he drops into a chair. "Mrs. Mangos?"

"Yes, Sir."

"How long will dinner be?"

"About an hour, Sir."

"So long," muses he, "well, Mrs. Mangos, what do you think of the Hall? It's superior to your last place for a hundred pounds, now, eh?"

"It's a fine estate, Sir."

"It's one of the largest in England," he answers, quickly, "there is not a duke in England can boast a larger!"

"I should say not, Sir."

"Are the neighbours—the *great* people—anxious about me at all? Have there been any inquiries?" asks he, as he draws off his gloves.

"No doubt they're anxious, Sir."

"Oh! no doubt—who are my neighbours? What are their names?—can you tell? Every man should know his neighbours, Mrs. Mangos. There's something about loving them in the catechism, isn't there?"

"There's the Cliftons, of the Shrubbery—the Mistlefords, of Grove Lodge—and the Stanmores, of Olverton House—they are the principal neighbours, Sir," replies Mrs. Mangos.

"Stanmore ! Stanmore ! where have I heard the name of Stanmore ? " says the master of the house, biting, meanwhile, at his great finger nails.

" He was a government gentleman once, Sir, but he came to live here, they say, after the death of his wife—he took it much to heart, and that unsuited him for office, Sir."

" Ah ! likely," says the other, moodily. " Mrs. Mangos, you can go."

When the door has closed, the gentleman looks at his son, stretched full length upon the couch.

" You are not asleep, Arnold, boy ? "

" No."

" It's hard if we don't find a fine wife for you amongst these gentry, in a year or two, Arnold," says he—" hard if your good looks don't win upon some soft-hearted miss, eh, lad ? "

" Why do you din into my ears about my good looks ? " answers the son, peevishly. " Do you think my face is to make amends for the vagabond life which I have followed, or for the graces of the dunghill on which I have been reared ? " .

" Arnold, you are fit for any society," says the father ; " the last sixteen months in which you have studied hard, and had many masters, make up for all lost time. Why, I've improved myself ! "

" I may pass muster, perhaps," replies Arnold—" I can talk about Virgil and Homer, because I am fresh from their classical rubbish ; but let them ask me about the last new poem—the last political crisis—the topic of the world—and I'm floored ! "

" Patience ! patience ! " cries the father ; " wealth, position, will gloss over that, and *brass* will do the rest. Now, I am no more a gentleman than a dog is—am not half acquainted with the ceremonies of good breeding—'etiquette,' as they call it—yet my money smooths it all over, and I am only rough, honest, and eccentric—ha ! ha ! This is all very comfortable," says he, looking complacently round the room, " and Walter Hern can enjoy himself here and be happy."

The son makes no reply, but lies staring at the massive cornice of the ceiling.

" Upon my soul, Arnold," cries Hern, passionately, " one

would think you had been used to wealth and power from your boyhood, you take to it so naturally, and show so little interest in your change of life. Yet you must feel it like myself—you *must* !”

“I feel the change, I shall feel it more soon, but I am tired.”

“I could jump about the room with delight ; laugh, sing, pray even—it’s all so new to me, to have servants waiting on me, and to be lord of so good a house !” cries Hern, “as for you, you’re not even thankful for my taking you from those blackguard gipsies, sharing with you my legacy, and making you my heir !”

“I am your son—it is my right.”

“Ay ! but suppose I had not owned you—suppose I had left you to live and die a gipsy, as I thought that I should be forced to do, once upon a time—what was to hinder me ?”

“Nothing,” replies the other, “nothing in the world. I was not satisfied then—I never was satisfied.”

“And never will be,” growls the father.

“Never—not if your brother—the long-lost Richard Hern, who ran away from home—had died, and left his next of kin Emperor of China—yet, for all that, I am less discontented than I used to be, and I am proud—proud as the devil !”

“That’s right,” cries the father, banging the table with his hand, by way of commendation, “we shall get on, I dare say. Ah ! the next of kin—it was lucky, wasn’t it ?”

“What was ?”

“My chancing upon the advertisement—my wandering into a coffee-house, and taking up the paper, and seeing it there, the first thing before my eyes—‘To the next of kin of Richard Hern, aged 42, who died in India, June 18—’ Why, it was more than common luck !”

“It *was* strange.”

“Well, I went to the lawyers—I told them that I believed the Richard Hern in the papers was my brother, who ran away from home years ago. I proved my own identity ; I told them where I was christened, and who my father was. By-and-bye,” continues Hern, gloating over the reminiscence, “I received a letter—then another—it was found out that that

identical Richard Hern was my brother ; that he never married ; and that I was and am the only relative alive, except a daughter of a younger brother, hanging about somewhere, and yourself. It was plain sailing enough, and so I came into a fortune fit for a prince. I was a made man, my boy ; I gave up my old chums—brave fellows some of them, though, Arnold!—bought this estate ; cleared off all law expenses ; found out my son, whom I left with the gipsies when a boy—made a man of him ; and have come to live here at Sanderstone, and be a gentleman for life ! ”

“ Richard Hern must have been a strange man,” remarks Arnold, yawning.

“ It was strange to go to sea—to India—to make a fortune, and die without a word, certainly ; but,” with a laugh, “ we were all strange, and it has proved all the better for me ! ”

“ Ah, yes—I suppose so.”

Arnold turns on his side, and falls asleep.

“ Cursed cool boy,” grumbles Hern, “ and a cursed hot one, too. One thing or the other in the extreme, and as aggravating as a pig ! ”

He slowly closes his eyes in imitation of his son’s example ; and when the servant enters to announce dinner, he finds them both in calm, but far from silent, repose.

His voice, slightly raised, rouses Hern ; but Arnold still sleeps, and the father lifts up his huge hand towards the servant, as a sign not to disturb his son. “ Let him sleep,” he murmurs hoarsely, “ he’s done up with the ride. Go on, and lead the way.”

Walter Hern is soon in his splendid dining-room, and a footman, lank and statuesque, stands primly behind his chair, prompt to obey every little want.

Hern looks at the man, drops his eyes, makes an effort to appear composed, fails, and says, gruffly :

“ You can go, old fellow.”

“ Eh ! Sir ? ”

“ This will be all very fine and nobby on state occasions, when we’ve company, and so on, but as for me, why I’d rather have my dinner in peace, and help myself ! You can go.”

The domestic bows, throws up the whites of his eyes in

silent disgust, when his back is turned to his employer, walks deliberately away, and takes his calves into the servants' hall.

Walter Hern makes a hearty dinner, and goes through complicated manœuvres with his knife, and drinks a large quantity of wine, and scowls at the servants as they change the courses.

When the dessert is on the table, and he is alone again, he reclines in his chair, and says, with much emphasis, "This is style!" and finally goes to sleep once more, over his style, with the silver nut-crackers in his hand.



CHAPTER II.

RETROSPECTION.

YES, Walter Hern had come into a fortune. Fairly and legally had he become a gentleman, and bought the Hall at Sanderstone, with the intention of sinking the past, and turning over a fresh leaf. There was every opportunity of beginning his new life praiseworthily, and, in his own opinion, he did so begin it by spending money with a free hand, feeling assured—and, perhaps, he was not far wrong, for are we not all money worshippers?—that the more lavish he became with his wealth the more respect his liberality would command.

He did not go about making atonement for a life of crime, or returning "conscience money," or praying forgiveness on his bended knees; he never repented—that was not in his nature.

Circumstances had placed him aloof from the temptation of other men's goods, and so he sunk his old acquaintances, and went in search of a son whom he had left amongst the gipsies when he was too poor, and his life too uncertain to afford protection for him. This was the one light spot on the dark heart of Walter Hern; he did not forget his boy when it was in his power to enrich him; he did not forget the child of the woman he had married before he was wholly bad, and though there might have been—and was—plenty of selfishness in the act, and the desire of companionship, and

the fear of reposing trust in strangers might have had their weight, yet there was a thread of affection, if only the instinct of brute affection, that led him to seek and find Arnold the gipsy.

He did more than find him ; he expended a large sum of money on masters and professors, who were to instruct his son in everything that should befit him for the new sphere in which he was to be placed ; and though the soil of the youth's nature was hard and unprolific, his passions fierce, and, at times, ungovernable, yet some seeds of learning took root and expanded, and Arnold's own ambition served to help him onwards.

Two years had passed since Walter Hern was made a rich man. He had begun to take a pride in his son. Nothing was too good that Arnold wished, nothing could be wrong that Arnold desired ; he gave him the reins, let him take his own course and follow his own whims, feeling assured that his son would love and honour him, and be a brave companion for him in his old age.

Save the woman who had died very young, and a dog that had dropped dead at his feet, after following him faithfully for ten long years, Walter Hern had never had a living thing to love him in his manhood, and now he was striving hard for his son's, and the son took his gifts, went his own way, and was not grateful. There was something callous and hardened in the young man—something of the father in him, bold, crude, and unsympathetic by nature.

Walter Hern was right in saying "the Herns were all strange ;" for, of the three sons of a strange father, each had been self-willed and mysterious. The youngest walked from his home one morning, was missing for weeks afterwards, and then a letter came to say that he was married, and living at Bernswood ; another, irritated by some words of reproof, ran away to sea, and finally settled in India, made money, and died there ; whilst the one surviving—the first and the last—seemed born a thief, and to have taken to robbery and crime as if by instinct, he was so ready at the craft. And now the son, and even quiet Avice ! And in those six years which have brought a fortune to Walter Hern, what has chanced to other characters whose outlines have been faintly traced upon former pages of this story ?

In Mrs. Badge, the tenant of the alms-house down in Essex, life was at a stand-still ; the wrinkles were no deeper, the gaze was as stony as ever, the spectacles, which appalled those who were not used to them, still suited her sight, and she could see through them Avice Hern coming along the little garden walk to pay her annual visit to her dear, dear Martha. And Avice, year by year, became less of the Wildflower and won countless prizes at the new fashionable school, and went to a Parisian academy which she did not like much, for six months with Rosamond, and came back, she and Rosamond, to find Mrs. Stanmore very ill indeed, more ill than she had ever been—too ill ever to recover.

The lamp burned low, the thread spun rapidly and snapped, and the Christian lady closed her eyes as in a peaceful slumber, and gave up all thought of this world. The secretary relinquished office, retired in the prime of life, and bought a villa at Sanderstone, near some old family friends, and took Rosamond, Avice and his sister to live with him there.

There was no thought on his part of Avice ever leaving them to make her way in the world ; he would not hear a word concerning it. The attachment between her and Rosamond was so great ; and was she not like a daughter to him also ?

Miss Jane Stanmore, housekeeper and general director, had it all her own way now, and was very important and authoritative on great days, and sometimes, by way of change, snappish and peevish on small ones.

She was fond of Rosamond in her way, and respectful to Avice in *her* way too, and attentive to her brother's wishes, and eager to respond to them.

Avice corresponded with Miss Wrickerton, and many a letter crossed and recrossed, and stamped with the Charing Cross post-mark, came to Olverton House for Miss Avice Hern.

The little lady still kept school, and hinted that she was not getting on quite so well as she could wish. Her old pupils had grown up young women and had left her, her new ones were not half so numerous, and she had made up the deficiency as well as she could, by undertaking an evening course of instruction ; old Mrs. Wrickerton had become

very feeble, and had got the palsy, and—the Lord be with you, my dear Avice!

So, gathering the threads together which move the puppets of this play, we set the strings in order and pull up the curtain.

CHAPTER III.

AN EVENING AT "THE SHRUBBERY."

SIX months more completed the Hall; and the "Ploughshire Gazette" officially noted the arrival of Mr. Hern and son at Sanderstone. The park was in better order, the long carriage-drives were all re-gravelled, the park palings were set up, the gamekeepers' and the gardeners' cottages, and the lodges by the side of the great scroll gates were rebuilt and tenanted. There was much to do on the land; there was the work of years to be performed, and their neglect to be remedied; but the mansion of the Herns was complete in itself; and Walter Hern was "at home," and Walter Hern's carriage, silver-mounted, and emblazoned like a peer's, had arrived from London, swathed in many bands of straw. All the reserve guard of footmen, maid-servants, and men-servants, were assembled to serve their lord and master. Visits from a few of the neighbouring gentry had been received and returned, and an invitation to an evening party at the Shrubby had already arrived with Mrs. Clifton's compliments. Mr. Walter Hern and son presented their compliments in return, and had great pleasure in accepting Mrs. Clifton's kind invitation; and Mr. Walter Hern was walking up and down the parlour, one winter's evening, white-neckclothed and dress-coated, waiting, with an air of unmistakable impatience, for the appearance of his son.

"Whatever is he about?" muttered Hern. "He takes two or three hours to dress, or more, the vain young fool! as if he could improve good looks by staring in the glass!"

After much solitary pacing up and down, and the sending of a few special messengers to Mr. Arnold Hern's dressing-room, with kind inquiries, and a father's compliments, and

would he be much longer? the young gentleman condescended to make his appearance.

Walter Hern turned to receive him with a scowl, stopped, elevated his thick eyebrows, and then expanded his hard mouth into a broad grin of satisfaction.

"That's the style, Arnold! That's the gentleman, every inch of him!" cried he, clapping his hands violently together. "Stand still a moment, and let's make sure it is you. A prince! a prince!"

Arnold faintly smiled at these encomiums, and curled the ends of his jet moustache with his white-gloved fingers. Despite the air of foppishness in his general appearance, there was, at least, the look of a gentleman about him; the haughty carriage was natural to him, and well became his height and looks.

"We shall be a quarter of an hour after time," growled Hern, forgetting his admiration in the cause of his delay. "They said half-past seven."

"Did they? Well, are you ready?"

"I ought to be by this time," said Hern, ringing the bell.

The servant appeared.

"Is the carriage at the door?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Come, Arnold."

He linked his arm in that of his son's; and the two marched from the room, and along the marble-paved hall to the open door.

"It snows," said Hern. "What a cold night!"

Did he remember that cold wintry night, when the snow fell thickly on him in his poverty, when he stood before the dark government office, and glared through its area-railings into that room wherein sat his poor old nervous father? Probably not. Men of Hern's mould are not troubled much by unpleasant recollections. Mr. Hern had not made allowance for fashionable invitations, and knew nothing of the virtue of impunctuality; and hence, whence his carriage whirled up to the house of Mrs. Clifton he was almost half an hour too soon, and, as a matter of course, the first of the arrivals.

Upon the servant announcing the Herns, and flinging back the door of a large and handsomely furnished room, Mrs. Clifton advanced gracefully to give them welcome.

Mrs. Clifton was a fine aristocratic dame of fifty, who would have made a capital duchess if the chance had been offered her—tall, stout, full-featured, and double-chinned, and in every respect a fine woman for her age. Walter Hern stared round the brilliantly-lighted room, and then clumsily bowed in salutation to the hostess.

"How kind of you to come so soon—to be so prompt to respond to our humble invitation, Mr. Hern!" said she. "I need not say how happy I am to have the pleasure of welcoming you to the Shrubbery."

Walter Hern bowed again, and gave one of his best smiles. He had been practising smiles at the Hall before the dressing-glass.

"And your son also, Mr. Hern."

It was Arnold's turn to bow, and to express his great satisfaction at making the further acquaintance of Mrs. Clifton.

Mrs. Clifton and her guests were soon seated before the fire, indulging in a desultory conversation, in which Walter Hern took a particularly small share. Mrs. Clifton was evidently embarrassed; she had been taken by surprise, and had not perfected all those minor arrangements which trouble the heads of country ladies on those important occasions called "having a few friends;" therefore, after paying all possible respect to her great neighbours, she apologised for leaving them a moment, murmured something about looking for her son, and then glided in her heavy purple satin from the room.

Walter Hern sat bolt upright in his chair, and looked at his son.

"Too soon, Arnold," remarked Walter Hern.

"Yes," said he in reply, "you were in such an infernal hurry to be off, and now we've got the whole place to ourselves. They were not prepared for us."

"They said seven."

"They said a lie, then," cried Arnold shortly; "there is an understanding as to the right time amongst them all; I suppose we shall catch the trick of it some day."

"Oh, very soon; and feel more at home in such affairs as this."

"Don't *you* feel at home even at a country party?" asked Arnold, looking at his father with a curling lip.

"Not quite. I feel rather awkward, Arnold boy. Don't exactly know what to say, you see. Cursed strange!"

"Say anything, and answer however foolishly, they will judge you leniently here," said Arnold. "We shall pass—we *must* pass! We are the fountain head of Sanderstone."

The door reopened and a young man entered with Mrs. Clifton; although not of commanding stature, he was above the middle height, with features clear and bold, and with a form as upright as a guardsman's.

The mother and son advanced. Walter Hern mechanically rose, and with difficulty restrained himself from pulling at a front lock of grizzly hair in a most subservient manner, an old trick with him in his vagabond days, when he lingered about club-house doors in the Mall and St. James's Street, watching for horses to hold, and dandies' dog-traps to take care of.

"Mr. Hern—Mr. Arnold Hern, I have very great pleasure in introducing to you my son."

Walter Hern muttered something about much obliged, and imitated his son's example by proffering his hand, whilst Mrs. Clifton went through the necessary introductions.

"Now I leave you, gentlemen, to each other," said Mrs. Clifton, evidently in a fresh hurry to be gone, "to argue upon those incomprehensible topics, newspaper talk as I call it, in which gentlemen will indulge, and which we poor ladies can never understand."

Mrs. Clifton made her second exit, and the three gentlemen stood round the fire-place looking askance at each other.

The Herns preserved an embarrassing silence after the door had closed upon the hostess; Walter Hern standing in rather a sheepish position, looking down upon his gigantic pair of patent leather boots, and Arnold biting his red lip nervously.

Mr. Clifton broke the ice.

"So you have come to restore Sanderstone to its ancient rights and privileges, Mr. Hern," said he, addressing Walter, "to fill up the blank which has depressed this little country spot, since the Hall has been untenanted?"

"I gave sixty-th—," began Hern.

"I fear that we shall fill the place of our predecessors

but indifferently, Mr. Clifton," hastily interrupted the son, "but, at least, we will try to do our best."

After some hesitation, Mr. Clifton said,

"We trust you will excuse any—any little shortcomings in our style, gentlemen; we are plain country folk, and this is but a quiet party of old friends, nothing more."

Arnold Hern quickly detected the reason for this half-apology, and with a ready tact availed himself of it, to increase the importance of his own position. He saw that Edward Clifton was fearful of losing caste in the eyes of the wealthy landowner and his son, and was equally desirous of preparing them for the contrast between the household of a country gentleman and that of the tenants of the Hall, who he naturally imagined must have such magnificent ideas, and have consorted with such great peers and princes in the course of their illustrious lives.

"Don't mention it," said Walter.

"It's of no consequence," said Arnold airily, "and we are quite country people ourselves. So much so," he added artfully, "that you will find our ideas of etiquette rather old-fashioned, and our manners out of date."

"Ah, you are jesting," replied Mr. Clifton. "By the way, I called at the Hall yesterday, but you were both from home."

"I did not know that," said Arnold, turning quickly to his father.

"Upon my soul, I forgot all about it, although Mangos left the card on the table," said he, with a rough energy which startled Mr. Clifton. "The gentleman will excuse us, I hope. We were giving the hounds a run."

"I saw the pack with the huntsmen last week," said Mr. Clifton; "the finest breed of hounds I have ever seen in my life."

"Are you a judge?" asked Hern, eagerly jumping at a topic on which he could converse more freely, and totally disregarding the lowering black eyebrows of his son.

"A fair judge, I believe," replied Mr. Clifton.

"Come and see my pack to-morrow," cried Hern. "There the finest devils you ever saw! A little wild, perhaps; one, I call him 'old Scratch,' bit at my hand yesterday with his damned sharp jaws; but fine hounds, Sir—fine hounds."

Mr. Edward Clifton's cheek flushed, but he made no comment.

"Talk of field sports, of hounds or horses," said Arnold, "and my father becomes quite enthusiastic, you see. Every man to his hobby."

"There is no man without his hobby," answered Clifton, "and Mr. Hern's is a truly English one."

The half explanation Arnold had offered in extenuation of his father's warm discourse perfectly satisfied Mr. Clifton. Walter Hern was a rich man, and—so thoroughly English."

Ah! how we respect a rich man! how content we silly dotards are, if the being we cringe to and flatter, whose jokes we burst into laughter at, and hold our aching sides, but keep his carriage, his banker, his town and country mansions, and his stud of "spankers!" Let a man make money, let him become a millionaire, and a title awaits him; but had a Stratford-upon-Avon genius lived till the year of our Lord one thousand, eight hundred and fifty-six, would he—son of a tradesman—ever have been Sir William Shakspeare?

Now Mr. Edward Clifton, a rich man as the world goes, a clever, shrewd observer in other men's estimation as well as his own, must for the time see imaginary halos round the ugly head of Walter Hern, must put his rough words, his coarse speech down to a little eccentricity—a fox-hunterish style in which lovers of field-sports naturally indulge—and think him a real John Bull, an honest plain-speaking Cræsus, and behold before him nothing but the owner of the Hall and estates adjoining, property he had often ridden by and envied. As for the son, he was a little too haughty and priggish, perhaps, but then young men of the same age and both possessed of a fair share of personal attractions are always a trifle reserved towards each other on first acquaintance—there was no doubt of their becoming good friends before the evening was out. The guests soon began to arrive in quick succession, there was a constant rattling of carriage steps, the noise of carriage doors opening and shutting without, and then the company commenced flocking in by twos and threes, and even in large parties at a time.

Mrs. Clifton received her company with stately composure, and the Herns still standing by the fire-place, one heavy and stolid, the other handsome as a young

Bacchus, were the lions of the evening, and the chief attraction to the guests, all of whom were introduced and passed in review, as if the Herns were monarchs holding a state reception.

"It is the best method of making the gentry of Sanderstone acquainted with their great neighbour," whispered Mrs. Clifton to Walter Hern, and with a smile, "if you would not invite us to the Hall, you anchorite, we, as the oldest residents in Sanderstone, must set the example."

"Yes, Ma'am, ah!—yes—of course."

Was Mrs. Clifton, the buxom widow, "setting her cap" at Walter Hern? He was *very* rich!

"Mr. and Miss Stanmore," announced the footman, and immediately afterwards, "Miss Stanmore and Miss Hern."

"Hern—did he say Hern?" exclaimed Walter to his son.

"I think so, but look!"

Mr. Stanmore, escorting his daughter, came slowly down the centre of the room, followed by Miss Jane Stanmore and Avice Hern.

The quondam secretary was a different man from him we saw last at the couch of his sick wife in the villa near Richmond. There was a graver look upon his face, a more intellectual though sad expression that set well upon him, there was a slight wrinkle on his high forehead too, and in one or two places the carelessly waving hair was lightly streaked with grey. Scarcely forty years of age yet, with a form tall and commanding, and a step as firm as a lion's, he looked a year or two older than he really was, until one of his old smiles—few and far between, now—lit up his manly features.

On his arm was Rosamond, not the Rosamond who sat by a certain fireside, her chubby arms folded on her knees, and her form bent forward in rapt attention to the fairy legends of a little invalid, but a Rosamond Stanmore, beautiful, tall, stately, blue eyed, fair haired, and with that soft English look on her face which we see in no other country, and which stamps the beauty of our maidens with an indescribable charm all its own.

"Is she not beautiful—perfection?" cried Arnold breathlessly, "look at her as she moves, father. Good God! look!"

He grasped his father's arm and shook him to arrest attention.

"A fine girl, Arnold, and no mistake," said Walter Hern, "you're right enough there—leave you alone for that—ha! ha!"

There was a great deal of talking and laughing in the room—there were little knots of friends scattered here and there, and the lace cap and pearls appertaining to Mrs. Clifton were bobbing in all directions. Miss Stanmore, broad and heavy-looking as ever, was chirping to Mr. Clifton; and Avice, ever silent, quiet Avice, stood by her side with her gloved hand on her arm.

Avice had not grown out of her queer little face; it was still dark, and the features still irregular; but over the whole rested such a gentle sweet repose, and in the large lustrous black eyes were mirrored such keen discernment, and power of quick observation that it was not at first sight a stranger would have been struck with the small share of beauty to which Avice Hern had a claim.

She was short, too, but her small figure was perfect, and every movement full of a quiet grace, and she responded to the words which Mr. Clifton addressed to her, in a voice singularly thrilling and melodious.

"We've got the lion here, Miss Hern," said he, in a low tone, "you must not be frightened, for although he's very fierce, I don't think he'll bite you, or Miss Stanmore. You must go through the ceremony of introduction, and grand salaams, and fancy him the Great Mogul. Permit me?"

He offered each of the ladies an arm.

"In one of your satirical humours to-night, Mr. Clifton?" asked Miss Stanmore.

"Oh, no!" replied Mr. Clifton, "I'm never satirical; I leave satire, a light sharp steel, which requires too much care in the handling for my clumsy fingers, to Miss Hern."

He spoke in a jesting manner, but Avice looked grave.

"Do not call me satirical, Mr. Clifton," she said. "It is not a compliment."

"Mr. Clifton! Mr. Clifton!" cried Miss Jane, "is that the gentleman?"

"That is our great neighbour, of whom my mother is proud. Your namesake, too, Miss Hern."

"He appears very solemn and grave," said Miss Stanmore, with a sigh, as she darted a sharp glance from her round

grey eyes in his direction, "and a widower, too, poor gentleman. How interestingly solemn, is he not?"

Walter Hern might have been more strictly termed interestingly dumpish; for as the Stanmores advanced, he lowered his blood-shot eyes, and stood gloomily looking down at the carpet, and nervously shuffling his right foot.

"Mr. Hern, my dear friend Mr. Stanmore is desirous of an introduction."

Hern glanced up a moment, and then, almost cowering from the steady, bright gaze of Mr. Stanmore, returned the stately bow with a clumsy, reverential nod, backing his son into the fire-place in his obsequiousness.

"Mr. Stanmore, Mr. Hern—Mr. Arnold Hern, Mr. Stanmore," said the lady of the house, in a voluble manner, "and dear Rosamond, if you will allow me—" and she dashed off the introduction of the secretary's daughter in her easiest and best style, and then led her away, leaving Mr. Stanmore with Mr. Hern.

"I have a lady of your own name to make known to you," said Mr. Stanmore, in that modulated tone of voice, which contrasted strangely with the husky notes of old Hern, and the sharp ringing voice of Arnold, "my ward, Miss Hern."

He stepped aside, and made the necessary introduction, Mr. Clifton following up with the name of Miss Jane Stanmore.

But Miss Jane Stanmore, who had put on her most gracious smile, and was curtsying with a deep intentness that threatened a genuflection, spreading her satin dress out at the same time, by side manoeuvres with her hands, was totally unheeded by Walter Hern, whose bronzed cheeks paled to a sickly yellowish white, and whose eyes half protruded, as though a hand gripped at his throat, when the figure of Avice stood before him, and a searching look was directed at him from beneath the long, black lashes.

Avice was pale, too; her face had changed to an almost marble whiteness, and though she trembled not, her hands were pressed convulsively to her heart.

"What is the matter, Avice?" asked Mr. Stanmore.

"I, I, have—yes, I must have seen this—Mr. Hern before!"

"To be sure you have," he cried, recovering his composure

by a violent effort, and stretching out both his huge hands towards her own, "this is a coincidence worthy of a playbook—a marvellous coincidence—my own niece, by—George!"

"Your niece!" exclaimed Mr. Stanmore, turning a shade paler himself, "are you a son of old Mr. Hern, an office-keeper?—surely—"

"A fact, my dear Sir, a fact!" cried Hern, pulling at his moustache with the two hands which Avice had disregarded, "such changes do occur in life. You were at the top of the tree then, and I, a loutish rascal, not even acknowledged by my own father. Ha! ha! that was rich."

"I was not aware old Mr. Hern left any sons," said Mr. Stanmore, half to himself, and half to Avice.

"Yes, Sir, this one," and she shuddered.

"The little lady's upset at seeing me," said Hern, with a forced laugh. "I was a wild fellow seven or eight years ago, and they used to frighten her about me. We shall be good friends shortly, I dare say, and she's not used to such agreeable surprises. Ha! ha! you'd better walk her up and down the room a bit, young fellow, or she'll faint, poor girl!"

Mr. Clifton, puzzled at the *rencontre*, and its results, hastened to comply, and escorting the half-sinking Avice and Miss Jane Stanmore, he moved slowly away, leaving Mr. Stanmore with the Herns.

Mr. Stanmore's first impulse was to follow their example until matters had received a further explanation, and a certain lingering idea of the old respective stations between himself and Hern's father—the Alpha and Omega of government—prompted, perhaps, the feeling; but his own good sense, the relation the man before him held to Avice, the station he had risen to, all negatived the first desire, and he stopped in a half backward movement and remained.

Arnold's quick eyes noted the retrograde step, and a fiery glance, quick and bright as the flash of the lightning, darted on the guardian of Avice, for an instant.

Less quick, and of a sagacity in polite society about equal to the elephant, Hern, eager to rub off the impression he had unwittingly produced, became more familiar in his discourse, and his deep sonorous voice was soon rising over the murmur of the guests.

"It's odd Avice is so scared; but I suppose her first im-

pression is the night on which I and my old father quarrelled about money matters, and she sat in the corner, by the fire, white as a sheet. I wasn't quite so well up in the stirrups then ! ”

“ I suppose not.”

“ But you gentlemen—you born gentlemen that is—always look down upon a man who has risen from the ranks. Well, it's natural ! ”

“ It is cowardly,” said Mr. Stanmore ; “ no man of fortune should be more honoured, or is deserving more of man's esteem, than he who has made his fortune for himself.”

He extended his hand, which Hern warmly shook.

“ Thank'ee for that speech,” said Hern, “ although I don't deserve it. My fortune came to me from a brother who died in India, and who made his fortune, you see, for somebody else. That must be precious hard, eh ? ”

“ Ah, yes ! ” replied Stanmore, abstractedly.

“ You said my niece was your ward, Mr. Stanmore ; now that sounds uncommonly curious to me, you know ; I left her in an ugly old office, poor as a church mouse—now I find her quite the lady,” said Hern, adding, with a laugh, “ but it's the Hern's turn to look up in the world.”

“ Six years since, upon the death of her grandfather, we adopted Avice Hern.”

“ Oooh ! I see,” said Hern, “ that was kind of you ; but that don't make her your ward, you know.”

An expression of pain, for a moment, passed over the calm features of Stanmore.

“ As her uncle you are entitled to an explanation,” said he, “ fortunately, it requires but a few words. Mrs. Stanmore, my late wife,” he continued, hurriedly, “ bequeathed part of her own fortune—a small part—a thousand pounds, to Miss Hern, in token of her love to her. In her will, I am constituted executor, and your niece's guardian.”

“ Very kind of your poor lady, to be sure,” said Hern, huskily, “ couldn't have behaved better if she had been her own mother. I must say, that if—hollo ! what are they going to do ? ”

“ The young folk are adjourning to the ball-room,” said Stanmore, glad of an opportunity to change the subject of conversation, “ we sober gentlemen content ourselves with quiet rubbers at whist, and constitute this deserted region

a card-room for the nonce. You do not dance, I presume?"

"Well, not much," said Hern reflectively, "and cards I'm not much of a fellow at, either. Whist I never took as a game; but if any gentleman is inclined to a hand at—"

"Why, I think you a capital whist player," hastily interrupted his son, "not too much forethought, perhaps, but a very fine player, on the whole."

"You will join the young folk, of course?" said Mr. Stanmore, inquiringly.

"I am not much of a dancer—I think not," replied Arnold, in a hesitating manner.

Mrs. Clifton, who was flitting to and fro very briskly, came towards the senior Mr. Hern.

"You do not dance?"

"No Madam—my dancing days are over."

"And you will not, Mr. Stanmore?"

"I thank you, no."

"But—but Mr. Arnold Hern, *your* dancing days are not over," cried Mrs. Clifton. "Come, Sir, let me introduce a partner to you—no excuses, young man, no excuses."

She softly rested her plump hand on his arm, and Arnold, forcing a smile, proceeded to escort her to the ball-room.

Arnold Hern was not in high spirits; in the midst of the gay party, he felt dull, and "out of sorts." Something seemed to weigh him down, and depress him, and he replied to the rapid chattering of the hostess by a series of monosyllables, and half-uttered sentences.

"Not the Hall ball-room, Mr. Hern," said she, as they entered a spacious room, lighted by two chandeliers pendent from the ceiling, "but room enough for my little party. We have managed to muster a quadrille band from the next town; but I'm afraid the music will scarcely please your fastidious ears."

Arnold Hern smiled, and answered:

"I think that you have an admirable little band; pray make no apology."

Mrs. Clifton was anxious to apologise for everything, and terribly nervous lest anything should catch the eye of her guest not strictly conformable to the rules of a more polite society.

"Why here is a partner for you, Mr. Hern," exclaimed

Mrs. Clifton, "the very young lady I could wish—Miss Mistleford."

Miss Mistleford was chatting to some young ladies on a couch in the recess of a window—a fine-looking girl of two or three-and-twenty.

"Miss Mistleford, I have brought you a partner for the next dance," cried Mrs. Clifton.

"Oh! thank you—I am obliged," she replied, archly glancing at Arnold.

"Nay, I shall be the obliged party if Miss Mistleford will condescend to favour me with her hand for the next dance."

Miss Mistleford bowed.

"Mr. Hern is quite a stranger amongst us," said Mrs. Clifton, "so I have been forced to find a partner for him."

"And for so fair and attractive a one, at least, receive my earnest thanks," he added, gallantly.

"Ah! Mr. Hern—a flatterer," cried Mrs. Clifton, laughing as she left him standing by the side of the blushing Miss Mistleford, "take care, Sophia."

Arnold Hern seated himself by the side of the young lady, and was soon at his ease, and talking commonplace nothings, suitable for the side scenes of private parties, ere conversation has dropped into flirtation and "making eyes."

"Are you fond of dancing?" asked Arnold.

"Oh, passionately!—for dancing, and music, and poetry, I am more than enthusiastic," cried Miss Mistleford, who was a trifle too rhapsodical for so early an hour in the evening.

"Feminine graces, all of them, and worthy of so fair a lady's interest," said Arnold; "and I suppose the first of them the favourite."

"At times."

"Ah! that depends upon the partner," said Arnold, then looking towards the dancers; "that is Miss Stanmore dancing with the elder Mr. Clifton—are they engaged?"

"Engaged?" cried Miss Mistleford, with a merry laugh, "what an extraordinary question for a young man to ask—engaged, no!"

"You speak positively."

"Oh, yes! for an engagement at Sanderstone is known half an hour after the compact is entered into between the interested parties. We have no secrets in 'Our Village.'"

"She is very beautiful."

"Do you think so?" inquired Miss Mistleford with a slight toss of her own pretty head.

"Perhaps not so strictly beautiful as attractive," mused Arnold, fixing his dark eyes intently on the subject of his discourse, "so attractive that—I beg pardon, I am talking very foolishly. The dance is over—if you will allow me—thank you."

Herose and offered her his arm, and they commenced promenading prior to the commencement of the second dance, for which they were engaged. Most of the dancers were promenading also, and upon Rosamond Stanmore passing with Mr. Clifton, she exchanged smiles with Arnold Hern's companion.

"You know her?" asked young Hern.

"We are all acquainted in a country place," said Miss Mistleford, "that is the greatest charm of an inland village. We fall into the primitive days—the good old times—and are parts, as it were, of one great happy family."

"Humph—exactly," replied Arnold, who began to grow tired of his sentimental companion.

"We are all so happy here—no envy, no uncharitableness, all love, Mr. Hern, all love."

"Thank Heaven I have come to Sanderstone!" fervently cried young Hern, with an odd twinkle in his eyes.

Miss Mistleford had no time to reply, for the little band in the corner struck up a waltz, and immediately afterwards she was whirling round with her partner.

Amongst those fashionable accomplishments which young Hern had made his study, he had particularly devoted himself to dancing, and had speedily become a complete master of its evolutions and complicated figures, all of which he performed with a singular grace as well as earnestness, which set him off to full advantage, consequently, when the young men of Sanderstone bent their eyes in his direction with a little curiosity as to the manner in which he would acquit himself with Miss Mistleford, the best waltzer in Sanderstone, they were surprised to see the graceful ease with which he was spinning round the room. It was a long waltz, but at its conclusion, he was as perfectly cool and unflushed as if he had been spending the last fifteen minutes in an ice-house, and after escorting Miss Mistleford to a vacant seat, and leaving her in conversation with Miss Jane

Stanmore who had come to see the dancing,—and to dance too, if Providence threw a chance in the way,—he strolled leisurely toward another part of the room.

“So this is polite society,” said he, half aloud, as he walked slowly down the centre of the room, as if lost in admiration of the chalked floor, the pattern of which had long since been shuffled into chaos, “well, I shall take to this naturally as mother’s milk, and soon be at home at it. I must have been born for high life—I feel it to be my true sphere already. There’s Miss Stanmore again, and she is beautiful and—”

The soliloquy was suddenly interrupted by his coming in contact with a mild young gentleman in gold spectacles, who was simpering along and smiling at some lady friends over his shoulder. There was a slight titter round the room, as both gentlemen reeled, and the gold spectacles fell off his prim nose to the floor.

Mr. Arnold Hern’s first impulse was to swear, his second to dart an annihilating glance at a party of gentlemen sniggering by the door, and his third to summon up a feeble smile as the mild young gentleman begged his pardon, and hoped that he had not hurt him.

“No, a little shake, that’s all,” said Hern, “but is it customary in Sanderstone for *all* fools to grin when one man jostles against another accidentally? I’faith you must be a funny lot and easily amused.”

“Exceedingly rude to laugh,” replied the other, picking up his spectacles, “but I suppose it looked very ridiculous—all my fault, he! he!—clumsy, wasn’t it?”

“Very,” assented Arnold as he strode away.

Choosing a corner of the room, young Hern stood and surveyed the guests. Presently Miss Jane Stanmore and her niece Rosamond crossed to some friends, and seated themselves only a few yards from him. Miss Jane Stanmore gave him a smiling bow of recognition, and acting upon it, he emerged from his retreat and went boldly towards the group of ladies. We say boldly, for no one, save he who has tried it, can imagine the amount of nerve which is requisite to advance unblushingly towards a certain number of ladies, to most of whom he is a stranger by sight, and to none of whom he has addressed a word. Hast thou ever tried it, friend Modestus of twenty-one?

"Miss Stanmore," said he, addressing the elder lady, "will you take pity on a desolate individual, who is almost without a friend in this happy crowd of faces?"

"Oh! Sir—pity," simpered Miss Stanmore, pursing up her thin lips and casting down her eyes. "I am sure that I shall be happy to assist you as far as it lies within my power."

"Might I have the pleasure of a re-introduction to your niece," said he; "Mrs. Clifton went so quickly through the formula, and so hastily drew her away, that I feel myself too great a stranger to solicit the honour of her hand for the next dance."

"Ahem! yes—*ahem!*—yes; Rosamond, my dear, let me introduce Mr. Arnold Hern to you—young Mr. Hern of the Hall."

Rosamond, somewhat surprised at this second introduction, slightly bowed, and blushed vividly beneath the earnest gaze directed from the stranger's eyes towards her.

"Our first introduction was so hastily hurried through, Miss Stanmore," said he to Rosamond, "that I dared hardly venture to address you upon such slight premises, or to request the favour of your hand for—"

"I'm engaged next dance, Mr. Hern," replied Rosamond, trembling at she knew not what.

"I beg your pardon; I did not know that," said Arnold. "The next?" Rosamond bowed.

Arnold looked instinctively at the companion of Rosamond, and found himself face to face with his cousin Avice—that cousin of whom he had never heard a word before.

The old affrighted look passed across the face of Avice, upon meeting his glance.

"Well, cousin mine! will you take pity on a forlorn cavalier, Miss Hern?"

"I am—that is—"

"Why don't be childish, dear!" cried Miss Jane Stanmore, "you said that you were not engaged, this instant—cousins, too! dear, dear, Avice, how strange you are to-night!"

Avice, with a bewildered air, took the arm of Arnold Hern, and he led her from her friends. The sets were nearly complete, and they had formed part of one an instant, when Avice said hastily to him:

"I cannot dance—I feel faint, Mr. Hern—you must excuse me ; pray lead me to a seat."

Mr. Arnold Hern hastily complied, and took the vacant place beside her.

"Do you feel unwell, Miss Hern ? " he asked.

"A little faint, that is all," said Avice, shuddering.

"Why do you refuse to dance with me, Miss Hern ? " he asked, somewhat sharply. "You cannot bear *me* any ill will ; this is our first meeting."

"It is all so incomprehensible," murmured Avice, "you *are* his son ; your name *is* Hern ? "

"Certainly," said he, shrugging his shoulders. "And the enmity which you appear to bear my father must descend to the son by legacy, Miss Hern ? Strange ! "

"What's that strange ? " asked a gruff voice.

The band which struck up at that moment drowned Avice's faint cry of alarm ; and when she recovered herself, Arnold Hern was missing, and Walter Hern was seated in his place.

"Well, Avice, and so you hate me because I was poor and ragged once—me, your father's own brother ? "

"I hate no one," murmured Avice ; "but your presence here, what does it mean ? what do you threaten ? "

The name of Walter Hern had been so long connected in her mind with guilt, there was still so much to suspect him of, that she could but shrink appalled from his very look, as she had shrunk in the years past, when he met her coming from school, in the back streets of Westminster.

"Threaten !" echoed he, "have I ever threatened anything so dreadful, that you should give way to those horrible stares ? I'm not a ghost or murderer, girl—I am your friend."

"Not mine ; you cannot be mine," murmured Avice.

"Avice Hern, you've been taught to hate me," said her uncle, "your ears have been poisoned with exaggerated accounts of what a bad son I was, and what a reckless vagabond I have always been. You can know nothing against me."

"Nothing to which I could bring conclusive proof," said Avice, regaining her firmness, "but everything against you in my own belief. Why have you come here ? "

"To settle down in life—to turn over a new leaf, if you like—to forget my old ways, every one of them," replied Hern. "Ah! you don't believe me; well, my actions must prove that. Avice, upon my soul I mean you well! I have come to Sanderstone to forget the past, to spend my money like a gentleman, and to help my friends. Is there any way in which I can help *you*?"

"None."

"There may come a time when you may require help, and then who so fitting as the brother of Hern of Bernswood?" said her uncle. "I make the offer, niece; accept it when you will, and don't believe me quite so black as I'm painted. There, I keep you from the dancing."

He rose, and with the old slouching gait, that no increase of fortune, or rising self-importance could get rid of, he crossed to Miss Stanmore, and found quite a complacent listener to his stories, of how he had lost every hand at whist, what a party he should give at the Hall, one fine day, and what a sweet girl his niece had grown; he loved her more than ever!

Avice sat where Walter Hern had left her, alone and thoughtful. The dance had absorbed the greater number of her friends, and excluded herself, a few forsaken ladies, Walter Hern and Miss Jane Stanmore, and one or two gentlemen lounging near the door.

She tried to fix her mind upon the one fact—that Walter Hern was at Sanderstone. In what manner was she to act towards him for the future? The music wearied her, the dancers glancing by disturbed her attention; Rosamond seemed very happy with Mr. Edward Clifton for a partner, and she, Avice, felt very dull and miserable. So Avice, unobserved, flitted off to the card-room; the guests were less noisy there, and she could think more intently, standing behind her guardian's chair, and looking at the game.

She found Mr. Stanmore deep in whist, with Mrs. Clifton for his partner. He looked up, with his grave face softening into a smile, as her light hands touched his shoulder, and said:

"Ah! Avice—alone?"

"Yes, Sir," she replied, "I have a headache to-night, and this room is a relief."

"Have you seen your uncle?" he asked.

"Yes, and spoken to him."

"He said that he should seek you out, and make friends," said Stanmore, playing his game quite correctly; "he is a rough gentleman—but honest in the main. You will get on very well together in good time, my ward."

"I hope so."

"Not that there will be ever much congeniality of sentiment between his crudeness and the gentleness of Avice Hern," said Stanmore in a lower tone, "but still the tie of relationship is strong, and there's a very handsome cousin, Avice?"

There was one of his old bright looks directed to Avice, who smiled faintly in return. The presence of the Herns was too deep a subject for a jest to her.

Meanwhile the ball continued; the music sounded merrily from the adjoining room, and no one missed Avice Hern, whose slight figure still remained behind the chair of the grave, handsome widower, who had become too interested in the play of his trump-cards to continue the dialogue with his ward.

Rosamond danced with Arnold Hern—it was a very embarrassing dance, for her partner had but little to say, and few words with which to relieve guard. He did not part with her after the dance, but after leading her to a seat, took the vacant one beside her, still silent and half frowning. When there were signs of a new dance on the *tapis*, he bit his lips, strummed impatiently on the floor with his left foot, and finally rose.

"I have been a very poor partner, Miss Stanmore," he said, half apologetically and half roughly, "dull as a bear—yet it has been the happiest quarter of an hour of my life."

Rosamond might have laughed at this compliment from any one else; if Mr. Clifton had hazarded the remark, she would have had a playful arch rejoinder wherewith to respond, but young Hern said it so impetuously, frowning at the band of musicians meanwhile, as if they were his deadly enemies, and he strode away in so rude a manner after its conclusion, that Rosamond first turned pale, then scarlet as a peony, and then pale again. He certainly was an eccentric young man! Arnold wandered about at the back of the dancers all the next quadrille, staring up at the two old fashioned glass chandeliers with their clusters of wax lights,

criticising the paper on the walls, and rolling the white glove he had drawn off his left hand into a hard ball. Then he talked to Mr. Clifton, who was likewise not dancing, screwed his glove into a tighter ball than ever during the conference, left Mr. Clifton and marched to the door of the card-room, looked in, stroked his moustache, caught sight of Avice, and marched back again.

After remaining for about five minutes at the ball-room door, he suddenly started towards Rosamond, stopped half-way, took a zig-zag course and engaged himself to Miss Mistleford for the next dance, and drew on a new pair of white kids for the occasion. When that dance was over he joined his father and Miss Jane Stanmore, who were talking about "fashionable preachers," left them almost as soon as he had joined them, and biting his lips nervously, advanced towards Rosamond, and requested the honour of her hand for the next dance.

Rosamond was going into the card-room when her aunt was disengaged, and sure enough here was Mr. Edward Clifton coming across to escort her.

Arnold bowed and moved away, sauntered in a nonchalant manner into a remote corner, took a vacant seat, put the five tips of the new kid glove on his right hand between his teeth, and had a good swear to himself for no ostensible reason that outward appearances could suggest.

Rising, much refreshed, he rejoined his father, and asked sullenly "if he was going home."

"Not yet, Arnold, boy, not yet!" replied Hern, "why you're not tired of it."

"Tired and sick as a dog!" said Arnold, peevishly, "you're not going to stay for the confounded supper, are you?"

"Why not?"

Arnold did not reply, he was watching Mr. Clifton, Rosamond, and her aunt passing through the doorway.

"Why not?" asked Hern, a second time.

"Why not, what!" said the son sharply, "what are you harrassing about in the devil's name! Whose's bouquet's that?" he eagerly asked, as he pointed to a cluster of exotics, nestling in laced paper on the crimson seat.

"Miss Stanmore's, she's just put it down."

Arnold snatched it up and hurried from the room, re-

turning an instant afterwards with the bouquet still in his hand.

"Why should I trouble myself about giving it to her," he said with a laugh, as he tossed it back to the place from which he had taken it; "I'm getting too polite for this world—eh, father?"

Walter Hern grinned, and showed all his yellow teeth beneath his bushy moustache.

There was a flower missing from the bouquet, thrown back so roughly to its place, a white rose-bud—but that might have fallen by the way. If so improbable a thing had occurred, as the abstraction of the flower by the felonious hands of Arnold Hern, he had jumped at a wrong conclusion, and was prematurely romantic, for the bouquet was Miss Jane Stanmore's, and his father had implied as much at the time, although Arnold had forgotten that estimable lady's existence.

When Walter and his son strolled into the card-room, the Stanmores and Avice had gone home, and to Arnold, the ball for the rest of the evening was a very second-rate, commonplace and lavender-water concern, Mr. Edward Clifton the most conceited puppy he had ever seen in his life, the Shrubby itself a shabby-genteel place, with dirty chandeliers, the whole house not much bigger than the coach-house at the Hall, the guests old fashioned country people, and Mrs. Clifton a fat, double-chinned magpie, in purple satin.

CHAPTER IV

BY THE FIRE-SIDE

IN her own room, lit by the flickering light of the red fire, sits Avice. All is silent in the great house of Olverton. They have been home an hour from the party, and Avice is left alone to recall what has passed during that long weary evening, and to have a good think to herself.

These "good thinks" are refreshing at times. We all feel the want of them on certain occasions, and would sacrifice much—the dinner-party at our friend the alderman's,

the last act of the tragedy with the cup and dagger, and grand tableau, the song with which Mr. Romeo Jones is about to favour the company—for a few quiet silent moments in our own chamber, where “those people will come not—where we can take our aching head bursting to reflect and brood on the *something* which has kept us all the long, long evening smothering our brain beneath the heavy pillow of conventionality.

How refreshing it is to Avice, after the noisy music, the buzz-buzz of the guests, the answering a thousand commonplace questions, and receiving commonplace attentions, even after the ride home in the carriage, wherein everybody has been silent, and Miss Jane Stanmore sleepy—to bid them all a hasty good-night, to enter her own room with its refreshing noiselessness, to close the door, lock it on the inside, and sit before the fire, with her little feet on the fender, her arms crossed on her lap, her slight form bent forward—to do all this and think without interruption.

As she sits heaped together in the chair, the fire-light glimmering on her face (she has extinguished the candle-light) she appears to be the same child who was left behind in the villa at Richmond, or the little girl in the black cotton dress, who used to walk sedately by the side of Mrs. Badge down Parliament Street, Westminster.

Avice thinks of everything, of Bernswood, of her father, mother, Mrs. Podgis, even of Spot ; of the second era, and her dead grandfather, and Martha and Miss Wrickerton ; of the new home, the new school, the Stanmores and the Cliftons ; of the present night ; of era the fourth, and the party that has come off at the Shrubby.

The fire begins to wane, the shadow of Avice all of a bunch—which has been dancing in the background so long, grows indistinct, and threatens to be engulfed in the darkness of the night ; the coals have burned hollow, and down in the hall there is a clock striking twelve.

The hour rouses her not, but a slight, gentle knocking, repeated thrice, calls her from the deep well of her thoughts, and she rises to the summit, coil by coil, and stands once more in the present, listening attentively.

She rises, and moves towards the door.

“Is that you, Rosamond ?”

“Yes, dear ! let me in. It is very cold standing here.”

Avice opens the door; and Rosamond, wrapped in her dressing-gown, with a thick Cashmere shawl spread over her shoulders, hastens into the room.

"Why you are in the dark, Avvy dear!"

"I put out the light when I first entered," replied Avice; "but here's the fire—oh, it's nearly out!"

Avice contrives to relight her night-lamp, and then says:

"But Rosamond dear, I thought that you had gone to bed. Why we must have been home an hour!"

"More than an hour, Miss Sly," says Rosamond, seating herself close to Avice; "oh! more than an hour."

"How did you know that I had not retired to rest myself, dear Rosamond?" asks Avice.

"I merely guessed, Avvy," she replies. "I thought that I might find you up and thinking away, after your old habit."

"Well!"

"Well, and furthermore, I thought how nice it would be to come for a cosy half-hour before I fell asleep—and chat about the Clifton's party."

Not feeling comfortable in the chair, Rosamond transfers her position to one at Avice's feet, stirs the fire into a genial blaze again; and then, crumpling her golden curls most woefully, she rests her beautiful head in Avice's lap, and looks up at her.

"Go on, Avice dear."

"Go on about what, Rosamond?"

"About the party."

"I do not know what to say about the party," replies Avice, one arm instinctively dropping over the white neck of her friend, "what is there to say, excepting that there were plenty of guests, that Mrs. Clifton was as chatty as ever, that Mr. Mistleford played whist in the old style, and trumped all his partner's tricks, that Mr. Edward Clifton was half inclined to be jealous of some one I know, and forgot all about himself and the set of his waistcoat in his anxiety, that there was a deal of criticising and 'pon honours' from those pale-faced young men who wouldn't come farther into the ball-room than the first three feet, that Miss Mistleford was rapturous, of course, and Rosamond Stanmore as—"

"As what, saucy Avice?" and the full blue eyes are turned upwards to the speaker.

"Shall I go on?"

"Oh yes! and Rosamond Stanmore as—"

"As wild, incomprehensible, and pretty an enigma as ever eighteen years brought into existence—as charming as ever to friends in general, but equally capricious and teasing to one in particular."

Rosamond's long eyelashes droop over the blue eyes; and she directs her gaze at the fire, now blazing and roaring merrily, and making up for lost time and Avice's inattention.

"Teasing! capricious!" murmurs Rosamond. "Who ever said that of me but Avice Hern?"

"But there have been few to find it out, darling," answers Avice; "and the teasing, as I remarked just now, applies to one alone."

"My dear Avvy, of whom are you talking?"

"Cannot you guess?"

"Perhaps I can," she says evasively; "but still I ask of whom?"

"Of Edward Clifton. There, don't blush—of Edward Clifton, Esq., of the Shrubbery, Sanderstone."

"Am I blushing?" asks Rosamond, looking more intently before her. "It must be the reflection of the fire. Ah! Avvy, Avvy, you are jealous."

Is it the reflection of the fire, also, the crimson glow of a new-born flame which casts the deep flush for one single instant athwart the dark face of Avice? It must have been; for she cries in a tone unfaltering and surprised:

"Jealous! jealous, Rosamond? *Jealous*, did you say, dear?"

Rosamond's silvery laugh rings out melodiously, as she replies:

"Do not tell me I am teasing then, Avvy, dear! You see I can retaliate, though Madame la Mouche used to say I was dull and spiritless; and I must give a sharp word now and then," looking up with her eyes sparkling gaily, "just to keep pert misses in due bounds, and restrain them from imposing too much on my happy disposition. Teasing, indeed!"

"Well, you did tease him—there!" cries Avice, putting

her small white hand over the rosy mouth of Rosamond, and hindering all reply.

When Rosamond is allowed free speech, she says :

"I shall be grave and sedate now. Are you listening, Avice ? "

"Yes, dear."

"Why should I tease Edward Clifton ? Why not Mr. Gregory, or old Mr. Mistleford, or—anybody ? "

"You know why," replies Avice. "Never ask unnecessary questions, my dear Rosamond."

"Avice," cries Rosamond, "do you think Mr. Clifton would—would have me to understand that his attentions to me imply more than is apparent—that he—what a silly goose I am to be sure ! "

"I comprehend," says Avice, quietly. "Go on, Rosamond."

"This is jesting apart, sister," seriously adds Rosamond.

"Sister" is a loving word between them in those affectionate moments when the heart speaks out, and gives evidence of the strong ties which bind them to each other. Avice sets herself to listen with earnest attention ; but Rosamond is silent, and is looking more intently than ever at the fire.

"Shall I speak ? " asks Avice.

"Yes ! "

"You wish to ask me if I think Edward Clifton intends more than the common respect engendered by long acquaintance, and by that friendship which existed between his family and yours, long before you ever heard of little Wildflower ? Am I right, Rosamond ? "

"Yes, dear."

"Candidly, then, I think he does," says Avice, her other hand stealing round Rosamond's neck, and joining the one already there, "and more, I think his mother sees it ; and more, your father and your aunt see it likewise."

"Oh ! don't say that, Avvy—don't say that ! " cries Rosamond, the tears swimming in her eyes.

"Why not say it ? You do not know your own mind yet. Is there no tempest of thought, no undefined feelings, which are beyond analysis concerning him ? "

"None."

"But, still you do not hate him *very* much ? "

"Avice, I do not love him," she says, burying her face in the folds of the shawl which lightly drapes her figure; "he cannot think so; he must know *that!* I feel now—to-night—as I sit here—that I have never entertained a serious thought concerning him; that I could never love him as I would wish to love a man destined to be my—husband! My husband! how foolish! But I should be very, very miserable, if I thought any word or act of mine had led Mr. Clifton to think of me too much."

"I have thought with the rest, dear Rosamond, that the latent tenderness would spring, in its own time, to affection, when the girl's heart had ripened to the woman's."

Rosamond shakes her head.

"I thought, more, what a good husband he would make you, despite his faults of temper, and his mannerism;—how clever he was; how unlike most young men in his thoughts and studies; and how his sober philosophy might have calmed and softened the over-exuberant fancy of my sister here; toned down those views of Life which, perhaps, she inspects at too great a distance, and with—you will pardon me—too fervid an imagination."

"Do you think me like Miss Mistleford, then?"

"Oh, no!" replies Avice quickly, "her romance of life is the romance of circulating libraries; yours is full of idealities, and coloured by the poetry of your mind. But we have wandered from the subject."

"Is it worth resuming?" she inquires, drying hastily a few tears which have left their traces on her face.

"It is getting late," says Avice, "let us postpone the subject till the morning, dear. I fear our 'chat' has found a conclusion as abrupt as it was unexpected. Good-night, Rosamond; I dare say Edward Clifton is not going to break his heart over your doll's face, so you need not look so sorrowful and woe-begone."

She leans over her and kisses her. Rosamond rises, draws the shawl tightly round her, and shivering beneath it, glides towards the door.

The clock strikes one as she flits from the room with slippered feet, leaving Avice cowering over the fire, and crying softly, yet a little bitterly, to herself. God knows for what! perhaps for Rosamond, perhaps about the Hems,

perhaps for some undefinable sorrows that ladies will weep about now and then—incomprehensible troubles which puzzle the best of us at times.

* * * * *

There are many things far less comfortable than sitting by the fire in one's bed-room on a cheerless winter's night, conscious of snow falling heavily without, and signs of zero in the streets. To get nicely warm and brown before you dart between the cold sheets (there is an effeminacy about warming-pans that every sensible-minded Lord of the Creation will contemn), is particularly luxurious, and, probably, for this reason, are many of our characters lingering over the red coal fires at so late an hour.

Passing over Miss Jane Stanmore, who has fallen asleep with her skirts close to the bars, and who may be burned to death, and set Olverton House on fire, before we hear of her again, we find many of the gentlemen—the leading players of this story, who have whole lines to themselves in the bills, and their names in the largest of capitals—still up, although the morning is stealing on.

Mr. Stanmore lies back in his great easy chair as full of thought as his ward was an hour or two ago, his arms crossed, his brows knit, his voice silent. He indulges in no soliloquy—it is out of his style—so, as we can do no good eaves-dropping, let us—Asmodeus-like—unroof a chamber in the Hall.

Mr. Arnold Hern is up, and, by the look of a bottle of sherry, and another of soda-water on a side table, inclined to continue so for some time to come. In one hand he carelessly swings a white rose-bud—a winter novelty. He is smoking a cigar, and the wreaths of curling vapour are fiercely rising to the ceiling, and playing amongst the window and bed-hangings. *He* soliloquises; but although there is sense in his discourse, yet there is a good deal of raving, and a little swearing; and so, *au revoir*, Arnold Hern!

Walter Hern keeps better hours; he is in bed, and dreaming of whist and four honours in his hand—the king and queen like his son and Mr. Stanmore's daughter, and the knave very much like himself, which perplexes him in his game, and throws him out.

And Edward Clifton—of whom we know so little at

present—what is he about? He is finishing up his diary, and frowning as he writes.

Is there any harm in peeping over his shoulder at the last paragraph he has indited, scowling, meanwhile, so savagely?

Perhaps there is! yet what a better estimate of human nature should we form—how much more truly should we know ourselves, and each other, if every man kept a diary, and inquisitive people, like ourselves, could peep over his shoulder, and read what is written of them and their neighbours!

But, to-night, we will spare the diary of Edward Clifton; there will come a time when we shall have more to say concerning it.

CHAPTER V.

CLIFTON SCORES ONE.

AVICE had come to a resolution concerning the Herns. Situated as she was, and knowing so little of her relatives, she could arrive at no other determination than to meet them at all times, when chance—if there is such a thing as chance—brought them together, with calmness, and quiet ease. They would not be great friends of hers, she felt assured of that; the remembrance of the bad son Walter Hern had ever been to her grandfather; of the suspicions she had had of his connection with the robbery at the office; his own repulsive manners—softened though they were by his change in position—all forbade a reciprocity of friendship between uncle and niece; and the cousin—her handsome cousin Arnold—seemed equally as objectionable, and one who would never gain much ground in her regard.

So Avice kept her doubts and suspicions to herself, and listened, the next morning, to Mr. Stanmore's recital of how Walter Hern had become a rich man, and for what a poor end that uncle Richard—whom she had never seen, and had only heard of once from the lips of honest Martha Badge—had toiled, and strove, and ruined his health, and died.

Her guardian was standing at one of the windows of the

sitting-room, with his hands folded behind him, looking across his spacious grounds towards Sanderstone high-road.

Avice and Rosamond were comfortably disposed in their chairs before the fire, very busy with books, and crotchet-cotton, and mysterious stitches, which they counted inwardly. Miss Jane Stanmore, depressed by the weather, and suffering from the reaction of the preceding night, was in an adjoining room, playing the "Dead March in Saul" with double extra semibreves.

Mr. Stanmore had just concluded the particulars of Walter Hern's rise in life, and was saying :

"That is the result of studying advertisements, children ; I never look at them myself, and so the name of Hern was printed and published, and the 'Times' was laid on my table, and no one knew anything about it except Walter Hern. It saved me unnecessary trouble, though, for I should have gone off on a wrong idea, and busied myself in making you an heiress, Avice ; but still it is everybody's duty to read the advertisements in the 'Times.'"

He shuddered as he made the assertion, and Rosamond instinctively imitated his example.

"Every advertisement may be a stepping stone to a lucky fellow's fortune," continued Mr. Stanmore, who was in a ruminative mood, "and the 'something to one's advantage' may apply to us one of these days. I really think that, from this time forth, I shall begin at the first column, and attentively peruse everything—from 'X. Y. Z. is entreated to return home to his disconsolate parents,' down to 'Wants a place—as ladies' maid.'"

Avice and Rosamond smiled at each other. Mr. Stanmore was less moody and reserved to-day, and when the head of the house is in a good temper, it is astonishing what a difference it makes, from daughters to "Jeames."

After a further inspection of the snow, he turned his back to the window, and looked at the young women by the fire.

"Eternal crotchet," said he, shrugging his broad shoulders, "I suppose we must represent the English-woman with her hook, as we do the Spanish lady with her fan."

"But a lady of sunny Spain is very accomplished with her

fan, and works far greater miracles than we do with our crotchet-hooks," said Avice.

"You speak meaningly."

"I speak but from books," replied Avice. "The Spanish lady, they say, can break hearts, and gain husbands with the fan."

"And why not the English lady with the hook?" inquired Mr. Stanmore, "why not, eh? sharp little Avice, speaking always from books, and never from experience—why should not the crotchet-hook have its attractions, and draw eyes to the nimble, pliant fingers, the graceful attitude, the drooping eyelids, the—pshaw!"

And tired of the nonsense into which he had been inveigled, he turned and looked out of the window once more. After some minutes, he began muttering to himself.

"Did you speak, father?" asked Rosamond.

"Confound that 'Dead March' your aunt is groaning out," he exclaimed, peevishly; "and that execrable bass she is extemporising. What in Heaven or earth made her think of that bass?"

"Aunt always plays the 'Dead March in Saul' after a party," said Rosamond, musingly. "It's very singular, is it not? I always think of the new waltzes and polkas, and try to remember them."

"Youth and age—false pleasures and false fronts. There is a difference between them."

And with this very crude allusion to a particularly glossy crop of curls, which gave a distinguished appearance to Miss Jane Stanmore on special occasions, he folded his hands behind his back again, and relapsed into silence.

He began to resume his habitual gravity of demeanour after a few minutes' reverie, and dropping into a chair, he brought his arms from behind him, and crossed them on his chest. Mr. Stanmore's cheerful moments were alway tinged with a little sarcasm, a something sharp, that prepared those who knew him for a sally, not always of the gentlest; but now the cynical smile round his finely-cut lips vanished, and the clear full eyes were fixed steadily at the spectral landscape beyond the window, beyond Sanderstone and its snow; a long distance off in his own mind.

"Shall I get you a book from the library, papa?" asked Rosamond.

"What, Rosamond dear?"

Rosamond repeated her question.

"No, no; I shall go to my study soon and write," he said. "My book makes small progress. I must be more diligent."

"His book" was an excuse at all times to depart; his MS. volume on the "State," dry, hard writing, full of statistics, and lengthy quotations from Pitt, and Fox, and Burke, which got on so slowly, was the subterfuge for long solitary days spent in the study—that "Growlery" on the Jarndyce principle; that grim, ghostly cupboard of Arthur William Stanmore, wherein the "House Skeleton" was kept locked, and the key of which was never lent to Fatima.

The two young women sat whispering by the fire, Rosamond listening more than speaking to Avice, as if she were receiving valuable counsel from her lips. Rosamond Stanmore was a girl without much stability of mind, and possessed of a heart easily influenced; one of those characters which give way and trust in others, yet of a character very loving and affectionate, won sometimes by a word even. Avice was of a firmer mould, and it was her thoughts which directed Rosamond's and on her that Rosamond relied for everything, seldom thinking for herself. Had the keen discernment of Mrs. Stanmore noticed this growing weakness in her daughter's nature, even in those early days when she had begged her husband to protect Avice Hern, and bring her up the friend of Rosamond, prophesying that the daughter would need one in the future?

True prophecy of the mother, standing on the brink of the grave, dug so early in the spring-time! Fatal foreknowledge of those days when she could no longer watch over her, help her, pray for her!

Yet to this singular weakness in Rosamond Stanmore, was allied at times a more singular firmness, which appeared at odd moments, asserted itself fitfully, and overcame all opposition by the strength of its unchangeableness. She had shown it once at school; she had given way before on all occasions; submitted to her many tasks for inattention without a murmur, and coaxed Avice to write her French lessons, and work out the "nasty tiresome sums," with the never ending rows of figures which always puzzled her, but on our heroine remonstrating one morning, and pointing out

the harm she was doing herself, and the unfair advantage she was taking of her schoolmistress and tutors, she snatched up her slate and went to her seat, and though for a year afterwards she was last in her class, and nearly cried her pretty eyes out over the Rule of Three and Fractions, she would never let Avice, or Mrs. Macspillon, or Madame la Mouche, interfere with her own style of arithmetic. It had shown itself with her aunt in a different way, and nearly once with her father. But bygones are bygones, and we have enough to do with events marching from the distance, an armed phalanx that may unhorse us in the grand mêlée, without looking back at the battle-ground over which we have plodded. There will be plenty of camp-followers—savage fellows with dark lanterns, and knives, and with masks on—spare the comparison, O Critics!—to track our wake, and see to those left behind, a few to lend a helping hand, and to say those kind, cheering words which bring the tears to the eyes, and others to look evil, and stab—stab to the very heart of our sentiment!

So Rosamond listened to Avice, who was whispering to her to join her father at the window, and divert his thoughts by a daughter's companionship. After a while, Rosamond hastened to comply, and set her whole heart in effecting that desired object.

She chatted of the party—of the coming snow-storm, of next spring and summer, as she sat in the recess of the window, half hidden by the heavy folds of the dark crimson curtains, and her father surveyed her with those fond, deep-thinking eyes, and listened to his daughter as though she was the beautiful child of ten years ago talking of her toys—her picture books—her great doll's house, and poor mamma!

Ah! poor mamma—we do not talk of her now with the wound not two years old, and the flowers growing over her grave!

The difference in his manner towards Avice and Rosamond—the Wildflower and the Garden Rose—had at first impressed the latter with confidence in Avice, and led her to place all her trust in that gentle lady heroine of ours. To Rosamond, Mr. Stanmore was the father; fond, paternal, and ever studying her slightest wish. To Avice he was respectful, when she returned home for good, respectful

without being patronising; placing her on his own ground, reasoning and arguing with her even, asking her advice occasionally, and, greater wonder still—taking it. Satirical and acid, mayhap, when he was in one of his strange sorts of temper, but never forgetting that he was a gentleman, and that Avice was his daughter's best friend.

The furrowed brow relaxed beneath Rosamond's sunny smile, and the pleasant, bird-like chirping at his side, and he said after half an hour had elapsed:

"And what do you think of the Hall folks, Rosamond?"

"I have seen very little of them."

"The young man—Mr. Hern, junior, you saw more of him," remarked Mr. Stanmore, "you were in the ball-room together, Rosamond, if I recollect aright. Well, is he all that is romantic, and handsome, and captivating?"

"I'm sure I cannot say what he is, papa."

"Very likely not—but what is he in your opinion, which may be different from mine and his own, Rosamond?" said her father.

"I cannot see much difference between him and other young men—but then," reflectively, "I saw him but for the first time last evening."

"Ah, true—did he dance with you?"

"Once."

"Only once?—that accounts for your indifference," said Mr. Stanmore. "Did he wound your vanity by dancing more than once with Miss Mistleford, or some other belle of the party, eh! puss?"

"No, papa, my vanity was not wounded all the evening."

"And what is your opinion of Mr. Arnold Hern, Avice?" asked Mr. Stanmore; "is he your beau-ideal of a 'charming' young man?"

"Far from it," replied Avice; "but you do not tell us the estimate you have made of my new cousin's abilities?"

"I never form an estimate of an individual at first sight," replied Mr. Stanmore. "I always resist, so far as I am able, the first impressions engendered by an introduction to a new face. It takes months before I know my man, and then I never change my opinion concerning him."

"But your impression, then?" urged Avice, persisting in her inquisitorial examination.

"I shall say nothing about that," he answered, decisively; "and—thank Heaven ——"

"For what, papa?" asked the wondering Rosamond.

"That the 'Dead March' is over, and Saul comfortably buried in the next room."

The dismal sounds in the adjoining parlour had ceased, and Miss Jane Stanmore immediately afterwards made her appearance, wearing as cheerful an aspect as might have been expected under the circumstances.

Mr. Stanmore, cruelly ironical, expressed his thanks for the musical treat his sister had afforded him, and Miss Jane bowed her head to his compliments, and almost believed he was in earnest. A general conversation herewith ensued, in which Mr. Stanmore took but little part, contenting himself with his old survey of the lawn and carriage drive before Olverton House. Mr. Stanmore was of a cool reserved temperament too, for although he was perfectly aware of two figures on horseback rapidly advancing, and those figures the Herns, father and son, yet he drew no attention to them, and sat steadily observing them as they came galloping up the drive as if they had no connection with his thoughts, and their indended visit to his mansion was a thing of no consequence.

Rosamond, looking up from her work, gave a start, and her colour heightened as she cried out:—

"Papa—Avice—here are the Mr. Herns!"

"I see them," calmly replied her father.

"But you did not tell us that they were coming, papa."

"You would have known soon enough," said her father; "very flattering, is it not, to call upon us?"

"Dear me! God bless my soul!" cried Miss Jane, "are they very near, brother? How foolish not to tell us, to be sure. Dear me!" and the alarmed maiden rose from her seat and disappeared in a hurried manner.

There was a summons at the door, a shuffling of feet in the hall, footsteps outside, and a servant's entrance.

Before the names of the visitors passed the footman's lips, Walter Hern and his son, who had followed a little too closely on the domestic's heels, were in the room. They had

left their riding coats in the hall, and came in very fresh and spruce, Arnold with a bright colour on his cheeks, that rendered him a better looking fellow than ever.

"Ah, ah! Mr. Stanmore," bawled Walter, tearing off his buckskin glove, and striding up to that gentleman, who had risen on their entrance, "make no bones about calling, you see, ha, ha! neighbours are neighbours all the world over, be they great people or small ones. My boy, here, must come and see the ladies—morning call, and inquiries after the ball, you see, Stanmore. He says it's all correct, and proper, and he ought to know. Lord bless you! I don't understand much about your fal-lal ceremonies myself—I'm John Blunt, of Free and Easy Hall. Well, and how are you?"

"Quite well, I thank you," replied Mr. Stanmore, making no exhibition of surprise, and returning the iron grip which Walter fastened upon him with such interest, that the tears stood in that gentleman's eyes.

Mr. Arnold Hern, with more respect for the fair sex, advanced to Rosamond and bowed gracefully over her hand, following up by a second bow to Avice, and concluding with an advance to Mr. Stanmore, at the same time as his father crossed and set to opposite partners.

"Well, niece, in a better temper I hope to-day, aye, girl?" said he, roughly. "Ah! Miss Stanmore, last night's late hours did not rob the roses from your pretty cheeks."

Rosamond blushed vividly at this compliment, and thought Mr. Hern, senior, the most uncereemonious gentleman she had ever seen in her life, and certainly there was little doubt Rosamond Stanmore was quite right in her surmise, although "gentleman" was a strong term to apply to that big bully with the bristly moustache and top-boots, whose whole appearance was a good deal like that of a fashionable prize-fighter's or one of those mysterious personages, stout, thick-set, and with bushy whiskers—who wear bottle-green coats, carry heavy-handled riding-whips, hang about the grand stands of all race-courses, and are seen at all horse-bazaars and repositoirics—men, probably, not unlike Richard Turpin, only not so refined in manners as that historical celebrity and prince of good fellows is supposed to have been.

Hern and son crossed once more, as if by prior arrange-

ment, and Walter was with Mr. Stanmore, and Arnold by the side of Rosamond, who had risen from her seat by the window, and resumed her old place close to Avice's side.

Arnold was by no means a "stickish" young man, and the opinion he had expressed of his own capabilities on his first arrival at the Hall was far below the mark. He may have rehearsed his part at home, or a great deal of it, but the ladies knew nothing of that if he had, and Rosamond listened attentively, and smiled at his playful comments on the party at the Shrubby, and even Avice was thawed from the reserve in which she had hitherto wrapped herself, and thought her cousin was not answerable for the sins of the father, and that Arnold was a young man of good education, some reading, and more native wit.

He commented on the ball, spoke admiringly—too admiringly—of Miss Mistleford, with a sparkle in his dark eye, as if he were laughing within himself; of the dancing, of Mr. Edward Clifton, and while carelessly expressing his respect for that gentleman, and his evident ability, Mr. Edward Clifton himself—to keep up the old adage, though not the comparison—made his appearance, hat in hand.

"Ah! my dear Clifton," cried Mr. Stanmore, "you are late. I had given up your call."

Mr. Arnold's thoughts immediately took shape.

"Mr. Clifton had been expected, then—he called regularly—he was evidently a very old friend, and, perhaps, engaged to Miss Rosamond, who knows? Well, what if he were? Did he care? what was it to him?"

"Good-morning, Mr. Clifton."

"Good-morning, Mr. Hern," said Clifton, somewhat distantly. "Well, Rosamond, have you recovered from yesterday's fatigue? and Miss Hern, I trust I find you well?"

Arnold Hern went on with his thoughts, although outwardly smiling and complacent.

"Rosamond! he called her Rosamond, too! Ah! it was all up. What a damned puppy the fellow was!"

Arnold was getting out of temper; he did not like the free-and-easy way in which Mr. Clifton drew a chair between

the ladies, and commenced a voluble discourse, so he joined his father and Mr. Stanmore, until the entrance of Miss Jane Stanmore *in curls*—Miss Jane, who was so surprised to see them!—caused a fresh diversion.

Walter Hern took a seat by that lady's side, and inquired tenderly after her health, leaving Arnold to sustain the conversation with Mr. Stanmore.

"Good Heavens! was Walter Hern smitten with the attractions of Miss Jane Stanmore, that venerable, heavy spinster, on whose face a painful attempt to look juvenile and gracious was frightfully apparent? Was there a chance—the first and the last—for the old lady—and such a chance? Could it be possible?"

As Walter Hern sat leering by her side, ducking his great head to the left and right in a series of positions which he considered the *ne plus ultra* of graceful attention, it reminded one of the Lion and the Lamb—a very fierce, half-toothless lion, and a very antiquated lamb indeed.

"Have you been riding far, Mr. Hern?" asked Stanmore, as he looked steadily at his companion by the window, and worked a mental photograph at the same time.

"Yes, we have not come direct from the Hall, Mr. Stanmore," replied young Hern, "we have been some eight or ten miles on the Branscombe road."

"Are you fond of riding?"

"Yes, if allied with hunting, or any excitement. I have enjoyed my ride to-day, certainly," he added, with a flushed face.

"Why to-day in particular?"

"I left the high-road to the old man, and went scampering across that rough bit of ground by the turnpike, seven miles from here. Do you know it, Mr. Stanmore?"

Mr. Stanmore nodded his head.

"The snow deceived me, and I got amongst the quarries; we were going at full speed, and there was a gulf like perdition in the way. I could not stop the horse, if I had even been inclined, so I urged him on and we cleared it by half a foot, that was all. Half a foot between life and death," cried he, "that was rare excitement!"

"You are fond of excitement?" inquired Mr. Stanmore, without commenting on young Hern's adventure.

"I do not like life eternally still, and every hour as smooth as my hand."

"Ah, indeed!" said Mr. Stanmore, "the hot blood of youth. I felt the same sensations when a boy—never since I have been a man."

"Why not since you have been a man?" asked Arnold, abruptly, and with some curiosity.

"I set a higher value on my life than to risk it for the folly of a boast," said he, quietly.

Arnold's brow darkened, and he, forgetting his part, and ready at retort, said:

"Perhaps your courage cooled with your manhood. I have known it so."

"And I," replied Mr. Stanmore, calmly; "although I did not give my caution the name of fear—but of duty."

"Duty to yourself," said Arnold, with a short laugh.

"No, a higher duty than that."

"I am curious to know it, my dear Mr. Stanmore. It may curb me."

There was a smile which seemed to doubt that probability, lurking round the fine mouth of Rosamond's father, as he replied,

"A duty to Him who gave us life, and taught us the lesson to be learned from it—the duty not idly to risk its loss by impotent bravado. That is my view of the case," said he, "of course, each man to his own opinions. It is not my place to seek to influence yours."

"No—oh, no!" replied Arnold, at a loss for once, and regarding Mr. Stanmore with a puzzled expression of countenance.

The topic was changed, and Arnold inwardly cursed the ill luck that had fettered him to his moralising companion, and left that smooth-faced Edward Clifton in conversation with Rosamond and Avice.

Mr. Clifton, aware of the exact limits allotted to morning calls, rose to take his leave, and the Hens, as imitative as monkeys, rose also.

Arnold again shook hands with his cousin and Rosamond, and the latter felt that the dark eyes of the young stranger

were fixed earnestly upon her face, though her eyes were veiled from his, and looking on the carpet.

The gentlemen were in the hall, and Mr. Stanmore with them.

"Come and see us, Stanmore," said Walter Hern, struggling into his thick riding-coat, "come to-night, and drink a bottle with me."

"Not to-night, thank you," replied the gentleman by birth.

"Well, any night or day, I shall be glad to see you," said he, "bring your sister and the girls, and you Mr. Clifton—you'll join us?"

Mr. Clifton returned thanks in a cool manner. The grandee of Sanderstone was not such an enviable companion, after all.

"We shall give a party soon, something that will astonish you all, won't it Arnold—eh, boy?" shouted Hern, "but don't keep away till that comes off, there's good fellows, don't."

The servant stood at the open door, regarding with round eyes of wonder Mr. Walter Hern, taking in every word, with the intention of retailing it with variations to his fellow-servants over dinner, adding thereto a full description of the master of the Hall—the "ruffest fellow he had ever clapped his hi's on!"

Walter Hern's eyes, in particular, rested on the wondering domestic, and he began hastily fumbling in his pocket.

Mr. Stanmore touched his arm.

"I never allow gratuities to my servants," said he, in a calm aside to him, "you will pardon me, but I dislike the practice—I would as soon have you pay me a shilling for the pleasure of your visit."

"I didn't know that," said Hern, "quite right and fashionable, I daresay. No offence, I hope."

"Offence! why offence?"

"I thought there might be—here's the horses."

The grooms and horses were before the door, and the three gentlemen were soon mounted and riding away, waving their adieux to Mr. Stanmore, who faintly smiled at them in return, and then, sure sign of being out of temper, walked up to his study, and drew out his manuscript sheets of

"The State," instead of returning to the ladies, and talking about the gentlemen who had lately honoured them with a visit.

The horsemen cantered along the drive into the roadway.

"Do you go our way?" asked Arnold.

"Not to-day!" briefly answered Clifton, who was as much out of temper as the gentleman he had left behind at Olverton House.

"I am sorry for that," said Arnold, drily.

"Why so?" asked Clifton, quickly snapping at a covert meaning.

"You have a fine-blooded mare beneath you, one of a high mettle—I would give fifty pounds to try its speed with mine."

"I never race," coolly replied Clifton.

"It is dangerous sport to country-gentlemen," sneered Arnold.

"They ride pretty well, too."

"In their own fashion," quickly responded young Hern.

"Can you ride," said Clifton with a hot cheek, as he glanced superciliously at young Hern's steed, "on *that*?"

"Damn it! my horse is better than yours," cried Arnold, more fiery each instant, "if you were not *afraid* to try him."

"Afraid!" cried Clifton, "where to? try Sanderstone village, now—off!"

Away they both madly dashed, whipping, spurring, plunging, leaving old Hern aghast.

"The fools will break their necks," cried Hern; "stop, stop—cursed asses that you are, stop! There they go. If there isn't a spill, I'm ——"

But the young men were half-a-mile out of hearing, and galloping furiously towards Sanderstone, the loose snow scattering right and left and over each other as they tore along, neck and neck, now one ahead, then the other, now a plunging slip, that threatened to leave a rider in the road; then smashing together as they rounded corners, and even in their excitement striking at each other's horses' heads. Arnold Hern felt himself losing ground, either the speed of

Mr. Clifton's mare eclipsed his own, or his horse was not fresh after the long morning ride, and the leap over the quarry; but, certainly, there was Mr. Clifton a horse's length in advance, and despite Arnold's oaths, and whip, and spurs, likely to keep so.

Everybody at home in Sanderstone that morning came rushing to their doors at the unwonted noise, and stared with horror and amazement at the pell-mell fury with which the two young squires came dashing through the village, and wondered what it all meant when Arnold reined in his horse violently, leaped from the saddle, and began battering the nose of his mare with the butt-end of his whip, anathematising her at the same time most eloquently.

Mr. Edward Clifton showed all his white teeth, as he rode away looking back at his late competitor, and raising his hat with great politeness.

"Curse him!" growled Arnold, "I'll be even with him yet. This is not the last race we shall run together, Ned Clifton—you have only scored *one*."

So the first horseman rode complacently homewards, while the third came up in the course of five minutes, and found Arnold and his steed backing and twisting about the road, and Arnold still hammering at the horse's nose, and swearing with the same easy fluency of speech.

"I'll shoot the horse when I get home!" said Arnold, with savage intensity, "do you think I won't?" he vociferated.

"I hope not," gravely replied Hern, "it cost two hundred guineas when we came down, and it's too good for that sort of fun yet."

Arnold began to lead the horse by the bridle.

"Why don't you mount?" cried Hern, "what are you doing?"

"I'll never ride it again, by my soul!" said the son, "it's my disgrace—it has humiliated me, and left a story that we shall never hear the end of," and he forcibly ground his teeth together.

Arnold kept his word, and for one mile and a half he walked moodily by the side of his mare.

They reached the Hall, Walter Hern left his son talking to the groom, and strolled to his stately sitting-room, stretching himself and yawning.

"It's a rum life," he grumbled, as he took a chair by the fire, "a drag of a life, but it's style, that's my consolation, style!—Hollo!"

His face lengthened, and for a moment he sat confounded; the loud report of a pistol was ringing without—the pack of hounds were barking violently, all the footmen had nearly jumped out of their splendid plush, and Mrs. Mangos and the maid-servants were in incipient fits.

Hern sprung to the window and threw it up.

"Hollo! hollo! what is it?"

His son came slowly from the side archway, his face pale and stern, his right hand grasping a pistol.

"Arnold! Arnold! you surely haven't been such an awful fool?" Hern shouted at the top of his voice, as he hung out of the open window.

"I said I would shoot it," he cried, carelessly tossing the pistol on the snow covered lawn, "did I ever break my word, or balk my resolution? The horse betrayed me."

"Where is it?"

"Where it will never betray me more!"

BOOK IV.

Vict. Yes, Love is ever busy with his shuttle,
Is ever weaving into life's dull warp
Bright gorgeous flowers, and scenes Arcadian ;
Hanging our gloomy prison-house about
With tapestries that make its walls dilate
In never-ending vistas of delight.

Hyp. Thinking to walk in those Arcadian pastures
Thou hast run thy noble head against the wall.

* * * *

Vict. I will forget her ! All dear recollections
Pressed in my heart, like flowers within a book,
Shall be torn out, and scattered to the winds !
I will forget her !

LONGFELLOW'S "SPANISH STUDENT."

Act. III. Scene. I.

CHAPTER I.

"ONCE A-YEAR."

TIME has marched on six months, sowing the seeds of many changes in the deep furrows of the path of Life.

Six months have glided by, and Sanderstone welcomes summer back, with rustling leaves, and gaily-coloured flowers crowding in the parterres of the great people, flaunting in the villager's patch of garden ground, sweetly nestling in the valley, lying deep among the brushwood in the park, hiding under the green hedge-rows with the nettles, scaling high up the rugged cliffs, blooming and laughing on the heights.

Summer has brought round the time for an appointed visit, and many miles from Sanderstone—scores and scores of weary miles, the face of an old woman peers, day after day, from an alms-house door, and looks anxiously down the winding road for some one. It is an old time-beaten face, sallow and wrinkled, with spectacles—great, ugly, iron-rimmed spectacles—across its long thin nose, a face half buried in the voluminous folds of a cap, from under which can be seen hair as white as the snow we left six months ago on the green lawn of Olverton House. Martha Badge has marched by three-score years and ten, and does not even condescend to stoop. She carries her gaunt frame bravely, and flinches not in the back beneath the load he of the Scythe and Hour Glass adds to every day. Martha has not found any new friends amongst the inmates of the other cottages of the row. She keeps "herself to herself," never condescends to gossip over the palings, is content with a snappish "good day" to Mrs. Aspen on the left, when they meet in the front garden for a minute or two, and declines all invitations to tea from Mrs. Twitter, on the right, who takes to her bed each winter with violent rheumatics, and is on the point of death twice a-week at least. Martha Badge, for all her reserve, has gained a great deal of respect from her cotemporaries, and bears the reputation of being a quiet decent body, a fact

of which there is little doubt, for we are sure that lady has deported herself with the strictest propriety from the first day of the reader's acquaintance with her.

Martha looks not for Avice from the weather-worn porch, overgrown with the aspiring clematis that scents the summer air, but for the postman, who is to bring Avice Hern's letter, naming the day she is to see her darling. When the letter comes, Martha, who has given up all idea of reading manuscript, and who secretly mourns over Avice's racing lines, with each word galloping helter-skelter after the rest, so unlike that beautiful text-hand Avice was once accustomed to indulge in, waits patiently for the butcher on his pony—a good-tempered young man, with cheeks like an apple, and a head like a bullet—and after inveigling him into her front parlour, puts the cherished letter into his red, beefy hands, and gruffly says: "Be so kind as to read that young man, and I'll thank you," and sitting herself before him, with her many bordered cap at a slight angle, and a horny hand to her ear, listens to every drawing word.

It is well that Martha's friend, the butcher, is of a mild temperament, and can stand a deal of buffeting, for Martha rates him soundly for stumbling over the hard words—a big boy like *him*—and has the letter read four successive times, slowly and sonorously, before she lets the victim free, and a lucky fellow he is then if he gets to his chubby pony without being called back in stern tones by Martha Badge.

Avice is expected in three days, and wonderful are the preparations Martha Badge makes for her reception, and much toiling up and down stairs is undergone on her part, till there is no time left for more household transformations, and she has but twenty minutes to trudge to the next town—a rambling old place, cut through with an iron road, where the train stops but once a day—and meet Avice at the hut of a station, on the edge of the embankment.

The train stops; a little lady in grey silk, with the prettiest bonnet in the world, daintily alights on the apology for a platform, and comes slowly up the winding path, followed by a curly-headed urchin in a smock-frock, who has appeared in a most mysterious manner, and offered to carry her carpet-bag.

There is no one about that end of the village, save the curly-headed boy and the man at the railway-station—the

last cottage in a row—to see Martha Badge take our heroine in her arms, and hug the breath out of her in a rigid embrace. Yet though the man and boy grin and wink at each other, and grin again, it is a sight worth seeing, a heart-warming sight that many an honest man might turn out of his way to witness, and be none the worse for afterwards.

"And thank the Lord that has spared me another year to see your bonny face, my own Avice," says Martha Badge, as they begin to walk, arm-in-arm, towards Martha's home. "There's the cold winter past, and you've come again with the bright summer, to see the old housekeeper."

"And how have you been all the long year, my dear, dear Martha?" asks Avice.

"Hearty—hearty!" cries the old lady, "save my hair, which gets whiter and whiter every year, I don't see much change in myself; but then, people never do."

When they are at home, and Martha Badge and Avice are seated at the little round tea-table, there are numerous questions to be asked, and Martha pours them, one after another, in rapid succession upon Avice.

"And have you found a young man amongst the fine folks?" inquires Martha. "Now do tell me, dear? you're not afraid of trusting me with a secret, are you, now?"

"Not if I had one to trust you with," cries Avice, laughingly.

"That puzzles me, my Avvy," says Mrs. Badge, gravely. "I expected on your eighteenth birthday—I kept it with a glass of wine, my dear—to have heard about some young man—ah! Avice, I'm right now, ain't I?"

"Oh! no; you're very wrong."

"Perhaps the young man and you are both too bashful," says Martha, earnestly. "I remember when I was a girl, thinking much too much about young Harry Elvers—he's dead many a long year!—who used to come with the groceries to your poor grandfather, up at Chelsea. I dare say it's the same with all girls."

Her eyes are sharply fixed on Avice, who blushes.

Mrs. Badge brings forth a fresh accusation at our heroine's confusion, and laughs rustily, and Avice laughs and denies everything, and they are very merry and happy over their tea, with the lattice window open, the red sunset beyond it,

and the birds twittering their evening hymn outside, in their nests up in the great trees.

Such a dear, quiet week in that old alms-house, Avice spends ; forgetting all about her grand home, and what a grand lady she has become herself, setting aside all her book-knowledge, fastening the clasps over her womanly intellect, which is strong and deep, and talking in the way that most pleases Martha Badge—like the simple child, and of the simple child, who was her companion in the government office, near Whitehall—bringing to the present those undying memories which please them both, and charm away those seven days.

Avice says nothing of Walter Hern, and of his residence at Sanderstone ; it can only disturb Martha, and work no good end, and Martha's nerves, though they are still strong, are affected by some things, and this is one.

The week vanishes ; day by day sinks, and is put by with the old scenery, in the dusty lumber rooms, where we keep things gone, and there is Avice thinking of her return, and Martha talking of next year as if it was next week, and she was seventeen, instead of seventy-five.

They walk back slowly and lingeringly, the curly-headed boy with the carpet-bag in the rear again, to the hut of a railway station, on the steep embankment, and Martha, with much care, descends to the platform, where one traveller—a rough country ploughman, with a red silk handkerchief and a reaping-hook—stands waiting for the train.

The train comes—another embrace, and convulsive hug, and Avice is gone, and before Martha can scramble painfully to an elevated position, half way up the rough acclivity, the long line of carriages has rattled far away, and the white handkerchief has long since ceased to flutter from the window.

CHAPTER II.

KATIE.

MEANWHILE, how has Rosamond Stanmore spent the week during “sister Avice’s” absence, and how many have

missed "sister Avice" at Olverton House, in Sanderstone village, amongst Sanderstone poor?

Before that question is answered, let us cursorily glance at those six months which we have left behind us, in our eagerness to march forward with events, and get on with our story.

The six months have placed Walter Hern and son on familiar footing with the gentry of the neighbourhood, who honour the wealth of the former, abide by his rough manners, and think him a fair specimen of the country gentleman. Arnold is less esteemed by the masculine gender, though his handsome face and fine figure have made him a general favourite with the fair sex, who *will* look, despite all moral teaching, and serious remonstrance, at the surface of things, and prefer Paris to Ulysses any day of the week.

The face and figure of Arnold are not his only qualifications; let us not be too severe on the young gentleman, for with the ladies, those tender impressionable creatures who see much in a whisker, and are voluble in the "language of flowers," Arnold has a half romantic way in all he does, and an earnestness about all he says, that is refreshing after the insipidity of more polished youths. With the gentlemen, however, he is often rude and abrupt, even when he has no intention of being so, as the reader may have already had occasion to observe.

We do not assert that his rudeness and abruptness is always unintentional; he has not been particularly courteous to Mr. Clifton, after their race from Olverton House to the village, for instance; and, to speak the truth, sharp words and fiery looks have not been lacking on either side, the last month or two.

Mr. Clifton, we have remarked, and Avice Hern has also had the kindness to remark for us, is not a commonplace young man, when you thoroughly know him, although he is not the man we would choose for the hero of a story-book. Possessed of deep feeling, he is prone to let it carry him into extravagance; with a fair share of pride, and just a little conceit, he is apt to adopt eccentric means, and fly to extraordinary resources, in order to make amends for the wounds that his pride may suffer in its jostling with life; his highly sensitive nature degenerates, even, at times, to the

morbid. These attributes are often peculiar to thinkers, and Edward Clifton is a thinker of no common order. If he had been a poorer man, he might have worked his way to a high position as an author, a poet, or philosopher ; but the incentive that spurs on many is wanting, and the voice of ambition, though not wholly mute, calls but faintly from the distance.

Edward Clifton's ambition points in another direction, at present, and his whole heart is set on the pursuit.

The Cliftons and the Stanmores have been friends, and close allies for two and three generations, and more than one Clifton and Stanmore have stood at the church altar in old times. Years ago, Edward Clifton had been accustomed to spend his holidays in the villa at Richmond, and Rosamond and her aunt had sojourned many months at the Shrubbery, when Rosamond was a little girl, and quite a child-love for Master Edward. But things have changed, now, more than either dare imagine ; the child-love is a young woman, and the boy-lover a studious young man, and a reserve, the last six months, has sprung up between them, which no one can account for, or find the solution to ; Rosamond takes her father's arm when they, the Cliftons and Stanmores, are strolling about the country, or in their own grounds, and he, Clifton, walks by the side of Avice Hern.

Clifton is fond of chatting to Avice when Rosamond is not to be had for a companion, for *she* can understand what he is talking about when he gets logical, or critical, and that is more than everybody can, he finds. He calls Avice a clever little woman, a shrewd reasoner in grey silk, and likes a lengthy argument with her upon the merits of new works, new writers, and new theories, which is all very dry work to Rosamond, who, once upon a time, did not like those *tête-à-têtes*, and used to feel cross, and inclined to hide herself in her own room and cry.

Oh ! that "once upon a time !" Rosamond finds it a relief now, and when Miss Jane Stanmore says to her, "Well, really, I don't know, but Mr. Clifton certainly seems to me, at times, to talk a great deal to Avice," she feels no fluttering in her bosom, no sinking at the heart, and but thinks what a nice couple they look, and how happy she should be to see Avice with so clever a husband, and what a good wife

she would make him to be sure ! But Clifton only sees a mind quick, retentive, and observant, in Avice Hern, and in Rosamond a heart, and a beautiful face that one might die gazing at—and die happy !

And Avice ? Why one does not read all Avice Hern's thoughts on her face, though it's a speaking face, too ; but she has an esteem for Mr. Clifton—not an esteem like that she entertains for Mr. Stanmore, which is sometimes that of a younger sister's, and at another time, and less often, like a daughter's ; but something that is quite different—an esteem without a definition ; but nothing more than esteem, oh, no ! or she would not think so much of Rosamond marrying him some day, and going to that London he talks so much about to live.

Avice has left a commission for Rosamond to fulfil during her absence, and that is to call regularly upon one of her pensioners, and she has a good round of them—not pensioners on her little silk purse so much, as upon her loving gentleness and Christian piety.

The pensioner is the sick daughter of a poor cottager, living in a rude hovel, about a mile and a half from Sanderstone, and to this hovel Rosamond one morning daintily trips along.

Rosamond is not afraid of solitary pedestrianism ; there are no travellers of the roaring-wolves species about Sanderstone, and Mr. Stanmore's daughter and Miss Hern are quite as much revered as the rector of the rustic church in the fields ; so Rosamond flits over a style, and makes a near cut through a forest path, the property of the Hall, and gets, unmolested, to George Millthorn's cottage, which lies in a rude dell, surrounded by rank brushwood and wild vegetation, all very picturesque, though exceedingly damp.

There is a background of trees, so close together that the branches have twisted and twined within each other, and made night of everything, and this bears the cheerful and appropriate name of "The Black Hollow !"

It is a favourite retreat of Edward Clifton's when he wishes to indulge in deep meditation, or is seized with a fit of poetical composition, and is a charming romantic place in the opinion of Miss Mistleford, who has a firm conviction of a murder having been committed there in time past—not for

any particular grounds on which to rest her belief, but the place is very funereal, and full of frogs !

The inmates of the cottage are three, who look up as the latch is gently raised, and two of whom rise and bow respectfully, whilst the third, a pale, handsome girl of sixteen, leaning back in a stiff wooden chair, appears a shade disappointed and disconsolately droops her eyelids over a pair of wild-looking brown eyes. The two who have risen are, George Millthorn and his wife—Millthorn, a rough, burly man, short of stature, but squarely built, with a bold, hungry-looking face, fringed by great ragged whiskers ; and his wife, a woman of fifty, a plain, simple countrywoman, thin, pale and poorly clothed.

"And a good morning to you, Miss Stanmore," says Millthorn, "and a hearty welcome to your handsome face, which has not looked in upon us lately."

Rosamond blushes at this implied reproof and says :

"You have had a more gentle and kind visitor, Millthorn, I am sure," and turning to the sick girl, "Well, Katie, are you better ?"

"Oh, yes ! I am getting well fast, thank you, Miss Stanmore," she replies, with a faint smile, "father, will you give Miss Stanmore a seat ?"

Millthorn proffers his own—there are three in the room—and walks to the open door, against which he lounges, with his hands in his pockets.

"Miss Hern is not home yet ?" inquires Katie, wistfully.

"I have received a letter informing me that she will be home to-morrow," says Rosamond, "and she has not forgotten your name in it, Katie."

"She's very kind," says Katie in reply, "she's an angel that never forgets—an angel that will fly away to Heaven some day, and leave it all like a dream !"

"Katie's not exactly *right* to-day," says Millthorn, looking over his shoulder, and speaking in a softened tone of voice, about which there is something touching, "she's put out about Miss Hern not coming yesterday, you know, and it's been bad weather lately, and she can't get into the lanes, and I've been rather in a passion myself—the old woman and I had a few words, and that's upset her too. But, you know her, Miss Stanmore, and will make allowances, I'm sure."

"Father's been so long out of work it makes him angry," says Katie, apologetically, "it must be hard to be so strong and big as he is, and nothing to do but sit with me, must it not, Miss Stanmore?"

"It's infernally hard!" cries Millthorn, passionately, "it knocks a man over, and makes a brute of him, axing your pardon, Miss Stanmore. It can't be helped, of course; your own father's very kind, and would help me if he could; but he's no land to work on, and I couldn't be a footman if he offered me the place, and two pounds a week as long as I was in it!"

"Have you tried the Hall, Millthorn?" asks Rosamond.

The man shrugs his shoulders, and the woman, who is bustling about with an old duster, stops in her occupation and says:

"Ah, twenty times; and all he gets is hard words and sour looks. The old gentleman lashed at him with a horse-whip last week because he was picking up a few bits of timber that had come down with the heavy wind of Thursday night, and the young un cares little about anybody save himself and his foreign face."

"Those *mustarshed* fellows are all alike," adds Millthorn; "but there's luck if we wait for it; and if Katie's patient, why I ought to be, or the devil's in it—axing pardon again, Miss Stanmore."

Mrs. Millthorn takes an old-fashioned Bible from a chest of drawers in the corner of the room, and pushes it silently towards Rosamond. Rosamond colours; her heart is with these poor people, and her sympathies are awakened at their evident distress; but she has hardly the courage to read aloud—she who always hated reading aloud at Madame La Mouche's—from the brown, badly-printed pages of the Bible at her elbow.

Millthorn, half-guessing her embarrassment, steps into the slip of garden, strides over the rickety palings and takes a walk up and down the road, with his hands in his pockets; and Mrs. Millthorn creeps into a back kitchen, and is shortly heard violently scrubbing.

Rosamond can read better than, gets pretty well over the ugly long s's—just like f's with something the matter with them—and reads with feeling and expression. The wild-looking girl listens with her long, thin fingers interlaced,

and her brown eyes fixed upon the fair face of the reader, and says, when Rosamond comes to a conclusion :

"You read that very well lady, but not like Miss Hern."

"There are few readers so good as Miss Hern, Katie," replies Rosamond, as she rises and ties her bonnet-strings under her pretty round chin, smiling at the same time, and not at all offended with the comparison.

"I dare say not," says Katie, after some reflection. "They all love her, don't they?"

"All."

"No wonder. You love her?"

"Very dearly."

"What a difference there is between you and her, though!" continues Katie: "you've such a fine lady's face. I can see it in carriages, and looking out of large windows in great houses. Why isn't Miss Hern as beautiful as you?"

"I don't know, Katie, I'm sure," answers Rosamond, reddening and becoming confused. "I'm sure I—I—there's my little basket on the table, I'll leave it till to-morrow. Your mother will find some wine and jellies in it, and a lot of things of which I've quite forgotten the names. Good-bye for to-day, Katie."

"But I like *her* face the best," says Katie, musingly, as she crushes the first eulogium.

"Going, Miss Stanmore?" cries Mrs. Millthorn, looking in. "Well, and thank'ee kindly for coming," dropping a courtesy; "and may the Lord reward you! Good-morning, Miss."

Rosamond is not free from blushing until she is outside the old gate, with its one hinge and broken latch. Here she meets George Millthorn, who touches his front lock of hair with a sunburnt hand.

"Katie's getting on, isn't she, Miss?" says Millthorn. "I thought she'd been an idiot once, but she's got over that. She improves every day, and gets strong too, for she can walk two miles—a mile there and a mile back, holding on to my arm a bit. If the house wasn't so cursedly damp, she'd grow up a fine young woman," he mutters to himself.

Rosamond, after expressing her conviction of Katie's improvement, bids him good-day and continues her journey.

She is half the distance homewards, when a dozen or more

hounds, large, white fellows, blotched thickly with brown and black, come plunging, snuffing in an opposite direction along the forest path; and behind them she recognises Arnold Hern, with a bright blue cloth cap jauntily set on his head, and a dog-whip in his hand.

His face lights up; he raises his cap, and lightly sets it in its place again, calls off the hounds, and accosts her.

"A bright morning, Miss Stanmore," says he, "and the brighter for this meeting."

He extends his hand; and Rosamond, feeling very timid and strange, places her own daintily-gloved hand in his for a moment.

"I did not anticipate the pleasure of seeing Miss Stanmore this morning," says Arnold, wheeling round, and walking by her side. "I was not aware this rough pathway had ever been thus favoured by her presence."

"I have been to the Millthorn's," answers Rosamond, regaining that self-possession and lady-like calmness which for one moment had taken leave of her in so extraordinary a manner; "a little commission from your cousin, Mr. Hern."

"Millthorn—Millthorn," muses Arnold; "I don't remember the name at all."

"They are a poor family near the Black Hollow," says Rosamond, in explanation, as they move on side by side.

"And you go to see them, Miss Stanmore?"

"I have been to-day."

"They should be highly honoured," remarks he, "these Millthorns. I have heard something of them. Are they very poor?"

"The father has been deprived of the opportunity of earning subsistence for his family, I regret to say."

"Regret!" echoes Arnold, "this man has a bad character, if I remember correctly—a hasty, violent temper. Violent tempers are the great bane of man," adds he, with a moral shake of the head, then adds again, "but you regret!"

"If you could obtain him a helper's place in the woods or preserves, Mr. Hern," says Rosamond, "you would be giving a man—I believe an honest one—the means of gaining a good name once more; but—"

"The man shall come directly," cries Hern, impetuously;

"he shall come to-morrow, be head game-keeper, steward—anything he likes. It's *your* wish!"

Rosamond feels her presence of mind deserting her once more. Her heart beats wildly, and she is assured of the scarlet blood mantling her cheeks. She would have given the world not to have mentioned Millthorn's name; but it is too late, and she can but bite petulantly at her troublesome lip in revenge.

"Not as a favour to me, I hope, Sir," says Rosamond, speaking with great dignity and reserve, "but as an act of kindness and charity to an unfortunate man. That will not be obliging me, but those who are afflicted."

"Certainly, Miss Stanmore, certainly," replies Hern hastily. "Far be it from my intention to lead you to believe that I have obliged you—you too!—in so contemptible a way."

They walk on in silence till they reach the end of the path, when he leaps over the stile, and stands on the other side with a hand extended to assist Rosamond, who blushes a third time, as she lightly crosses it, her hand trembling in his.

"I spoke but of your wish, Miss Stanmore, nothing more."

Mr. Edward Clifton rides by on the very mare that eclipsed young Hern—rides swiftly by with a darkling frown, but to all appearances totally unconscious of their presence.

Arnold looks after him with a strange smile curling his red lip. Rosamond halts on the other side of the stile, as if no longer desirous of his company; and Arnold's smile disappears, though he takes the hint, and makes no further movement to proceed in her direction.

They part, and Arnold stands leaning against the stile with his hounds crouching round him. He watches the receding form of that fairy vision long and earnestly.

"Is she worthy that stiff quaker fellow who rode by just now?" he soliloquises. "No, a thousand times, no! If I love her—and why should I disown it?—I at least love like a man who could worship her youth and her loveliness."

He does not say for how long a time he could offer his devotion. His passion is fierce and wild, like unto all his passions; but the scathing flame of the lightning is bright

but an instant, and leaves but desolation in its track. God help Rosamond! if she ever stand in his track, and seek warmth from the flame which flashes out from the night. God help her! if she dream of this man, and from the rich store of her fancy, mould the Ideal of Love! There comes a day when dreams end, and the waking from Love is the death of the heart.



CHAPTER III.

LEAVES FROM THE DIARY OF EDWARD CLIFTON.

“June 20, 18—.

“THE bitterest moment of a man’s existence is that wherein he finds the great aim of his life has fallen short of its object, and stands on the desolate shore watching the bark cast adrift, and floating purposeless to the ocean.

“There can be no bitterness like that, no loss which is so beyond reparation—it is a moment that lasts for ever, bringing a pain we must endure alone, and opening a wound which our sickly smiles must endeavour to conceal.

“Has the time come for me? has the arrow sped but in vain, and floats my hope on the waters, the life-wreck to the rock?

“It seems so. I feel that it is so—that the time has come to act, to test the strength of the delusion, to lay aside the glittering falsity by which I have been deceived, to assert the pride of my manhood, waving aside the vapid sentiment which has made life but romance and the dupe of a dream.

“I believe that she loved me once. But the heart of a woman throbs at the face of a stranger, and her faith flickers away as the autumn leaf from the bough. ’Tis not the friendship of a life, or the devotion that has endured longest, which makes the deepest impression, or lays the surest foundation on which the temple is built.

“Possibly they met by appointment—incontestably he loves her, and she—? Is there a doubt! dare I doubt still?”

*

*

*

*

*

"June 22, 18—

"Miss Hern has returned. What a contrast, the free bright looks of the one, with the new-born thoughtfulness of the other! I have seen them both and compared them—the uncut diamond and the dazzling gem, the fine thought of the one, and the varying sensibility of the other—steadfastness and capriciousness—a whole heart and a divided one! A man might find balm even from the stings of disappointment in the society of Avice Hern—might be happy with her, and for a long life-time know no sorrow in her sweet companionship. Not that I could ever love her in the true acceptance of the word, though I should esteem her highly, more than highly—but I am writing the veriest trash, and am as maudlin as a school-girl."

(A pen is run through these lines in the original manuscript.)

* * * * *

"June 23, 18—.

"What a relief to be home once more, Mr. Stanmore's long wearisome dinner-party at an end, and the calmness of my own study a welcome back to the Shrubbery.

"With what a heavy heart I have returned! There is no room for longer surmise—I know all, and the blow is heavy.

"I know all, though she deems me ignorant! there is no eluding the vigilant glance of the eyes sharpened by jealousy and distrust. I know more than she would confess to herself, and it is a terrible knowledge that crushes and humiliates me. Is the man my equal? in what stands he my superior in her eyes? Not in wealth, or his expectations—Rosamond judges not for the motives of the world, there is no age or self in her thoughts.

"Well, Life is an enigma, Rosamond is an enigma—and I am—a fool!"

And with this well-founded remark, for most lovers wear the bells and jingle them in admirable tune, the diary con-

cludes, and a week or two elapses before a fresh date follows, and Edward Clifton has got over his wrongs, and is sufficiently well in mind to resume his pen and discourse on his hopes and his fears, in the hurriedly scrawled record from which we have had the unmanliness to make extracts, not offering them to the reader as specimens of Mr. Clifton's composition—far from that—but as notes by which the state of Mr. Clifton's mind may be judged.

CHAPTER IV

THE FETE AT "THE HALL."

CARDS of invitation for the long promised fête at the Hall were issued early in July, and circulated extensively amongst all the gentry—including two baronets and a rich Jew banker who lived and "kept house" within twenty miles of Sanderstone.

Everybody talked of it, the intended guests met each other in the streets and country lanes, and made it their one topic of discourse ; the villagers, over their pellucid ale, told all they knew and more about the preparations that the Herns were making for the grand occasion, and the "Ploughshire Gazette," whose editor had received a card, kept dropping mysterious hints which set the inquisitive mad with unsatiated curiosity.

The day before the fête was a busy day for Sanderstone ; innumerable vans from the great town far away where the railway station was, came toiling along the heavy roads with London parcels, unwieldy hampers, and boxes of all shapes and sizes, and one huge horse overburdened with the good things of this life dropped dead on the road, and added to the sensation of the hour.

The appointed day came at length, and at half past eight o'clock—no earlier time was fixed for a reason unapparent, the roads to Sanderstone for many miles around gleamed with carriage lamps all advancing to the centre of attraction.

A crowd of villagers had assembled in the roadway, to see the company drive in at the great gates, on each side of

which was a mounted groom in the Hern livery, bearing aloft a flaming torch.

All the way down the long dark avenues, at regular distances, were the mounted grooms with torches, and the glaring fitful light streamed on the broad paths, and shamed darkness into the woods beyond.

There was no end to the carriages that came thickly streaming onwards, locking within each other's wheels, gently staving in the panels of those in advance, backing suddenly on rampant horses in the rear, and grazing many a pair of plunging legs.

It was a mild summer's night, and hosts of stars in the sky overhead seemed peeping down with wonder.

The Hall itself was a blaze of light from its myriads of windows, and more servants with torches stood in a crowd about the portico.

"The good old times come back, girls," said Mr. Stanmore, as he pulled up the carriage blind, and surveyed the brilliant scene; "the dear feudal ages when the Lord of the Hall gathered his clansmen and weak vassals together, and showed them what a magnificent fellow he was, and how everybody ought to love and obey him, he had so many retainers and such lots of money."

"I'm sure it's all very beautiful," snapped Miss Jane, sitting stiffly by his side, and in one back-breaking position for fear of creases in her new brocade. "I cannot see anything to sneer at yet, Mr. Stanmore."

"Sneer!" echoed her brother. "I would not sneer for the worth of all those big lights, which are frightening the poor horses into fits. Does a man sneer when he draws a comparison?"

"Yours may be a little invidious," said Avice, who sat on the opposite seat with Rosamond.

"Cruel is he, or she, who misjudges," said Stanmore. "I sneer not, suspicious Avice Hern; all this I acknowledge to be very grand, though I have seen grander on less important occasions."

"What occasions?" asked Rosamond, innocently.

"On foggy nights at Charing Cross and Piccadilly I have seen twice the number of links," he replied, "not to mention gas-lights flaring from the main, and all to keep vulgar omnibuses, carts, Handsome cabs and stray equipages,

from running into one another, my dear. But those happy days are gone! Here we are—please to mind the pitch."

Walter Hern had not been sparing of expense in his entertainment, and if portions of it were not in strict accordance with polite taste or modern fashion, yet the scale on which it had been conducted took a great deal away from the effects of false style, and at least served its object in surprising the guests. The vestibule, full of servants in rich livery, and decorated with flowers, as costly as some of the ladies carried in their bouquets, and lighted up with immense waxen bougies of a Catholic appearance, commenced the series of effects with which Walter Hern had determined to astonish his dear friends.

The spacious ball-room, which would not have been out of place in Buckingham Palace, was crowded with admiring guests, and in the midst of them moved Hern and his son, smiling, shaking hands, and bowing in all directions.

Arnold Hern had good reason to look disparagingly at the small chandeliers of the Shrubbery, those in the Hall ball-room were so immense and so dazzling, as they hung with their thousands of lights from the rose-tinted ceiling. At the farther extremity of the room, in a raised orchestra, sat a large band of musicians, destined to be conducted by a celebrated professor, all hair and white waistcoat. When the confusion and bustle had somewhat subsided, sets were formed for a quadrille, the famous leader of the band just mentioned took his place, described a geometrical twist in the air with his baton, frowned, stamped his foot, struck violently at nothing, and the rich music pealed forth, and the ball began.

Arnold opened the ball with a real baronet's sister, and the real baronet, a soft looking young man in light hair and green spectacles, condescended to lead out Miss Mistleford, whilst the other real baronet, an old gentleman with white hair and a squint, whose character was not free from blemish concerning the ladies, and never had been since he was thirteen years of age, took the arm of his "dear friend," Walter Hern, and strolled through the suite of rooms with him, denominating everything "Waptu-wous," and even the footmen "splendeed." The ball-room windows, many of which were unclosed, though thickly draped with curtains,

touched the ground, and opened on a massive stone terrace, which ran along the whole extent of the mansion, and commanded a view of the garden-grounds, brilliantly lit up with coloured lamps. Mr. Stanmore, later in the evening, congratulated his host upon the effect, saying "Vauxhall gardens on a gala night could hardly have eclipsed it;" to which eulogium Walter Hern replied, with a hoarse laugh, "Very likely not," and whispered confidentially into his ear, "I took the hint from there, to tell you the truth, Stanmore." Stanmore smiled at this piece of information, and said "He thought so," hoping at the same time that there would be fireworks to match? Hern concluded the colloquy by a heavy chuckle, and a "Wait a bit, I believe you."

The first dance was concluded, and already the grand terrace was becoming a favourite though dangerous promenade, on that sultry summer night; and those ladies and gentlemen who had not seen Vauxhall Gardens, with its "one hundred thousand additional lamps," thought there was fairy land beyond the terrace, and that the Hern's fête was quite regal, princely, and novel.

Arnold Hern, after he had led the baronet's sister to a seat, wandered about the rooms with a somewhat anxious look on his face. He came upon the object of his search at last, and was shaking hands with Miss Stanmore, Rosamond, his cousin, and Mr. Stanmore, and welcoming them to the Hall. He offered an arm to Rosamond, and Avice, actuated by some unaccountable feeling, hastily shrank back, and took the disengaged arm of her guardian, who raised his eyebrows at her in an inquiring manner, after Arnold had led Rosamond to the dance for which he had engaged her.

Avice murmured, "I cannot answer the question your looks imply, Mr. Stanmore."

"You are not particularly attached to your cousin, I begin to think, Avice."

"Not particularly," she answered.

"How singular!" affirmed Miss Jane. "He's an agreeable handsome young fellow too, and his ways are extremely winning."

"Are they?" inquired Stanmore, with a dubious look.

"I think so," replied his sister, "and everybody thinks so except Avice. Oh! he's quite a ladies' favourite."

"Indeed!" said her brother. "And may I ask if he be a favourite of Rosamond's too?"

"Well, I hardly know," said Miss Stanmore, in reply. "Rosamond tells me that she thinks him a nice young man enough—but she does not say much about him."

The face of the father clouded for a moment, and a question that he was about to ask died away on his lips.

"There's Mrs. Clifton chatting away on yonder couch," he said after a short pause. "I shall leave you ladies with her, and take an inspection of the place. What a fine mansion, and—what an owner!" he muttered to himself.

"I thought that you were going to solicit my hand for the next dance," said Avice, affecting to pout her small red lips; "but no, you must fly from the charms of our sex, and deprive me of my one chance of a partner."

"I will find you a younger," he replied, moodily, "one whose heels shall be as light as his thoughts, and whose face shall be as shining as that mirror."

"Oh! thank you," cried Avice.

"Is that your programme hanging from your wrist," asked Stanmore, "all satin and gold, and fiddledee—fligree I mean?"

"Yes," said Avice.

He halted, looked more attentively at the article which he had made inquiry concerning, and said, "I see that the next dance is a quadrille, Avice, I don't mind booking myself for that ordeal—there!"

"I am highly flattered."

"I shall leave you, Jane, with Mrs. Clifton," said Stanmore, "and if you will be a good girl, and don't flirt, I shall come for you later in the evening, and dance the *Cachuca* with you."

"I shall not require partners—especially brothers," replied the young thing, who, for a wonder, was in capital spirits.

"Glad to hear it," he answered, in his dryest tones; "saves me a world of trouble and respectful attention. Ah! my dear Mrs. Clifton, a very good evening to you."

The duchess of the Shrubbery, all smiles, rose to salute her friends.

"Where's Edward?" inquired Mr. Stanmore.

"Here he—" said Mrs. Clifton, turning round, "no, he is

not. Well, that's very singular; he was here a minute since. Dear me."

"I suppose that he is dancing?"

"No, the dance had begun when he was sitting here," said she; "perhaps he's talking to Sir James Fishfin."

"I'll go and look after him," said Mr. Stanmore. "Never fear, Avice, I will not deprive you of your accomplished partner. Take that seat, and wait patiently for the happy moment—I shan't be long."

He pressed his way through the admiring mothers and fathers, the sour spinsters and the bashful young men, standing without the silken cords that divided them from the dancers, and went in search of Edward Clifton.

With difficulty he came upon the required gentleman, who was standing at the back of a group of old ladies, with his arms folded bravo-fashion, and a pair of eyebrows black and lowering and bravo-fashion, too."

"Ah! Edward Clifton," cried Stanmore, lightly laying a hand upon his arm to arrest attention, "you are thoughtful this evening; in what land of dreams are you sojourning?"

"Mr. Stanmore!" said he, starting and colouring.

"A grave face for so grand a party," said Stanmore, "and after so much preparation for your amusement."

"For mine?" said Clifton, with a forced laugh; "for the world and the 'Ploughshire Gazette.' Have you seen the editor?"

"Do not know him," replied Stanmore, "and do not want. Keep me from an editor all the days of my life."

Clifton smiled faintly.

"Why are you not dancing, Clifton?"

"I'm not in the vein for it, Sir," answered the young man. "I feel dull, and my spirits, to tell the truth, are not of the best this evening."

Mr. Stanmore, observing the fixed gaze of Edward Clifton, glanced in its evident direction, and beheld, about twenty couples distant, his daughter and Arnold Hern. There was a father's pride on his clear, expressive face, as he watched her, young, radiant and happy. There was a father's anxiety as her handsome partner leaned towards Rosamond, and conversed with her—a little too earnestly, *mayhap*—when the pauses in the dance left them standing side by side. There was the manifest sympathy of a friend as he turned to

Clifton, and endeavoured to divert his attention, but that gentleman, jealous lest his thoughts should be read correctly by the keen observer at his side, resisted the attempt, and said coolly :

"I have been watching your daughter the last few minutes, Mr. Stanmore ; the most graceful, as well as the most beautiful girl in the room."

"You flatter her, my dear friend."

"No," he answered ; "and I think that there are many here to bear me out in the assertion. I often wish that I were your son, Mr. Stanmore ; she would be a pretty sister to be proud of."

"Very."

"Mr. Hern dances well," criticised Clifton ; "a trifle too lackadaisical, perhaps, as if it was a trouble to him ; but that is a fashionable way, and sets not amiss in that quarter. How is Miss Hern ?"

"She is very well, I thank you."

"I must secure her for a partner, the next dance," said Clifton, "or the gay world around me will think that I am envious of our friend's display, and have come with a rueful visage to depress the spirits of all my acquaintance."

"I am afraid Miss Hern is engaged next dance, Clifton," said Stanmore.

"Ah ! with whom ?" pausing in his movement to retire.

"Some stuck-up dandy or other," answered Stanmore, as he turned away "I forget his name."

When Mr. Stanmore went towards Avice to remind her of her engagement, he found Mr. Clifton deep in conversation by her side. Clifton had improved in spirits since their parting, although there was something wildly gay in his manner, at which Avice was puzzled, and which Mr. Stanmore, for the time, studiously overlooked.

"Sorry to interrupt this charming *tête-à-tête*," said he, "but I have come for my fair ward."

"Is Miss Hern engaged to you ?" cried Clifton, in some surprise.

"And why not, friend ?" asked Mr. Stanmore, "May not an old gentleman dance for once to amuse the company ? Do you set an interdict upon my pleasures, tyrant ?"

"I resign, Sir, I resign," cried Clifton with a laugh, as Stanmore led Avice to her place in the next quadrille.

"Well, Avice, and how do you like your new profession?" asked he, as they stood watching the arrangements.

"Profession!" exclaimed the wondering Avice.

"Flirting, my dear ward, flirting," he replied; "it's a nice amusement for quiet corners and side couples, don't you think so? I'm sure Edward Clifton is of my opinion."

"Was I flirting very desperately?" inquired Avice, with a rosy cheek.

"Upon my honour, I am so bad a judge, that I cannot respond to the question," he said, "but I shouldn't wonder at all. Now for *Le Pantalon*; I forget all about it, and shall put our *vis-à-vis* into a fit of silent disgust; but, *commençons*."

Whilst the dance was proceeding, Edward Clifton, disappointed in his partner—was he disappointed?—went sauntering up and down the different rooms, and twice passed Miss Rosamond Stanmore, the first time with a respectful bow, and the second as if unaware of her presence, by the side of his own mother. The third time he advanced in a nonchalant manner towards her.

"Not dancing, Miss Rosamond?" he exclaimed, in feigned astonishment. "How is it that the belle of the room sits 'in maiden meditation,' with not even an attendant cavalier? Where is Mr. Hern, or Mr. Markham, or Sir James? This is ungallant in the extreme!"

Mrs. Clifton laughed, and Rosamond laughed too, though a warm flush sprang to her face, and the slightest gleam of pique sparkled in her blue eyes. Mr. Clifton, she thought, had no right to treat her quite so ironically; he was presuming on his old acquaintance.

"I am not dancing; that should be sufficient reason, Mr. Clifton," she replied. "I find the rooms very close, despite these open windows."

"You have danced, I presume?"

Rosamond bit her lip to restrain her rising anger. She knew that Mr. Clifton had stood surveying her and her partner, Mr. Arnold Hern, nearly the whole of the last dance, and yet he asked so unnecessary a question.

"Yes, Sir, I have."

"Is this seat disengaged?" he asked of his mother, pointing to a vacant space between Mrs. Clifton and Rosamond.

"Yes, Edward dear," replied his mother.

Edward dear leisurely dropped into it, and said carelessly to Rosamond :

"I was afraid that it might be reserved for a more favoured individual ; but, happily I am deceived, Miss Stanmore."

"Why afraid, Mr. Clifton ?" inquired Rosamond, with a certain amount of asperity lurking in the musical tones of her voice. "Would there have been much cause for *fear*, supposing that it was reserved ?"

"As a gentleman, I am bound to say so."

"You are pleased to be courteous this evening."

"I am pleased with everything ; the fête is magnificent," answered Clifton, with a curling lip.

"Quite equal to the Shrubbery's," responded Rosamond, with flashing eyes. She regretted the sharp rejoinder the moment afterwards, it was crude and ungenerous, and on his changed looks she read the expression of such honest pain.

There was a silence. They were alone together. Mrs. Clifton had just shifted her place to the adjoining recess, to chat with a lady from the next county.

"The Shrubbery, Miss Stanmore," he said, after a pause, "is, no doubt, far beneath your high consideration. We are humble people, and cannot dazzle you with that brightness which surrounds such great people as the Herns. If Miss Stanmore is but pleased to tolerate my mother's home, or grace it by her presence, that is sufficient recompense for us, and all that we can anticipate from her."

Rosamond did not reply, but fluttered her fan violently.

"I cannot expect Miss Stanmore's critical judgment on our poor fête of last winter ; it was beneath it," he continued ; "but this display—if she would favour me with her comments, I should feel obliged."

"I have no comments to give," said Rosamond, quietly.

"Then how can I ever profit by good teaching ?" he exclaimed ; "how know what pleases or offends your taste ?"

Rosamond made no reply, and he changed the topic.

"Shall you dance this evening, Miss Stanmore ?"

"I am engaged next dance." Rosamond was quite out of temper, now.

"To whom ?" he said quickly.

"Mr. Hern," she answered, briefly.

"Again ?"

"Yes, Sir ; again," replied Rosamond, biting her lips.

"Twice in succession—*twice!*" he murmured.

"I thought you were not aware that I had danced before, Mr. Clifton, much less with whom," said Rosamond.

"I beg pardon—I was speaking absently," he said, then muttered again, "*Twice!*"

"It is not Mr. Clifton's part to dictate my partners to me," said Rosamond, with a heaving chest. "It is not for Mr. Clifton to sit here and insult me by his sarcasm. I shall be favoured by—"

She stopped.

"By his retiring," added Clifton, rising. "Certainly, Miss Stanmore. I should be a churl, indeed, to intrude longer upon you, keeping back by my presence here a more welcome face. I wish you a good evening."

Clifton reverentially bowed, and slowly moved away, with a countenance that gathered gloom with every step. He brushed by the throng of dancers, separated the heavy curtains before the windows, and passing through them, strode to the end of the terrace bare-headed, and went down the wide stone steps into the garden.

He marched along the winding gravel paths, passed the festoons of gaudy illumination lamps, swung from tree to tree, took no heed of half-a-dozen men fixing huge firework devices on the grass-plot, and quarrelling amongst themselves as to the fitting station for them, and stopped but when he reached a lonely walk, by the side of an immense green-house, the door of which was open, and emitting from within the fragrant odour of a thousand flowers.

He began to pace up and down, and to soliloquise.

"She thinks to hold me in her chains, and that I love her—her very look betrays a mocking triumph, which burns into my soul, and makes me almost hate her. I will foil her," he cried, stamping his foot, passionately, on the ground, "I will show her, and those who rate me love-sick, how easy it is to put a false construction on a common courtesy, and deceive themselves by supposition !"

He paused, looked grave and stern, and then went on again.

"I have never loved her !" he cried. "I feel that I have never been her slave, and that there is another I can love and *will!* Rosamond Stanmore, you think me jealous—we shall see !"

He wheeled round quickly, retraced his steps past the pyrotechnic artistes, still quarrelling over their powder patterns, and variegated fires, went under the festoons of coloured lights up the steps, along the terrace, through the curtains into the ball-room again, with its noise, its heat, its throng of guests, and its lively, ringing music !

We have said, in a preceding chapter, that the deep feeling of Edward Clifton was prone to carry him into an extravagance of action ; did he intend that night to be more extravagant, more reckless, and more wicked than he had ever been ?

The dancing was going on with spirit ; the grand ball at the Hall was a complete triumph ; every face looked happy ; and the hoarse laugh of Walter Hern, typical of excessive satisfaction, was heard from the adjoining card-room wherein he was playing whist with Miss Jane Stanmore for a partner. Clifton gave a sharp glance round. Arnold was promenading with Rosamond ; the dance was concluded in which they had been partners ; and they were slowly walking up and down—he talking, and the fair girl on his arm listening and smiling. Once she turned her face hastily away at something he was saying, and Clifton saw the passing blush mantle over her face. His lip curled contemptuously, and he muttered :

"To be won by a man like that ! to be attracted by the prime mover of this vulgar scene—a man whose taste does not extend beyond illumination lamps and fireworks. She was not worthy of —— no matter !"

He closed his lips, breathed hard, and, with an air of settled determination on his visage, joined Mr. Stanmore and his ward, who were lingering by the entrance doors, and looking down the room.

"Why, where have you been, Clifton—star-gazing ?" asked Mr. Stanmore.

"I have been indulging myself with a walk on the terrace—the room is fearfully hot."

"Without your hat, Clifton ?" said Stanmore.

"I forgot it."

"That was imprudent," he remarked, "and the M.C. of our department has, with an eye to change of scene, arranged the hats in the most excellent manner—quite a genius. No fear of going home in a shabby brown, as an exchange for one's last new beaver, here. These Herns are great in—hats."

"And fireworks," added Clifton.

Mr. Stanmore laughed, and Avice looked grave. She could not understand why an invited guest should turn a host's desire to please into irony and satirical compliment—it appeared to her to be mean and unjust; but then she knew but little of the polite world.

Happy is the host who never hears the comments his guests have been unsparing of, or listens to the estimate of the evening's amusement over sundry tea-services at home—never learns how those "damned good-natured friends" have laughed at all his past efforts, sneered at his taste, and made wry faces in remembrance of the wine drunk so plentifully at his table, how they have criticised him, his dress, and his speech after supper—dragged forward his relations, and made jests of rare merit on all their physical infirmities—cast up their eyes at the old fashion, or the new fashion, or the no fashion at all—spared not even the red-eyed servants who had fagged all the night for them, and who had to sit up till the early morning, to see them out at the front door.

Happy is the host who hears nothing of this, but takes congratulations, and warm, hearty pressures of the hand, and looks of admiration at everything, for real earnest, believing not in "sham," and veneer!

All men are frail; and if Mr. Clifton were soured by his own thoughts, perhaps Mr. Stanmore hardly liked a richer man in the county than himself—for had he not been the great man of Sanderstone, before the *millionaire* bought the Hall, and took the brilliancy out of him?

"You have not danced to-night, Edward?" remarked Mr. Stanmore. "Have you abandoned sweet Terpsichore for a fairer goddess?"

"I may, in time," replied Clifton. "But really I have had a difficulty in obtaining a partner this evening, every fair lady has been so *particularly* engaged. May I venture, once more, to solicit the honour of dancing with Miss Hern?"

Avice bowed assent to his request.

"Then I shall go to the card-room," said Stanmore; "the guests have seen quite enough of my saltatory accomplishments this evening; *au revoir*."

He nodded familiarly to Clifton and Avice, and strolled away leaving them together.

For an inexplicable reason, there was an embarrassing silence after the retirement of Mr. Stanmore, and Avice felt the arm of Clifton, on which her small gloved hand rested, shaking nervously.

She was the first to speak.

"I fear that you are not well to-night, Mr. Clifton?"

"My dear Miss Hern, I never was in better spirits," he replied; "at the beginning of the evening there certainly was a little depression, for which I could not account—but *now*!"

Avice coloured at the "now," and thought Mr. Clifton an excessively strange young man, who had something on his mind.

Mr. Clifton soon proved that he was in the best of spirits; he danced, chatted in a light and easy manner, with his face beaming with smiles, and his hazel eyes—he had very handsome hazel eyes the ladies said—sparkling with vivacity.

He spoke to Avice in a peculiar tone, too, different from that in which he addressed his mother, or his friends, in the course of the evening—a softened voice that to hear was to set her heart beating very strangely.

What did he mean by not leaving her side after the dance—by calling to her recollection, as they sat together, old scenes of festivity they had shared—by showing how powerful a memory he was possessed of, by bringing back small incidents which she thought everybody had forgotten but herself, and which to remember was to her almost a sense of pain? What did he mean, thought Avice, by looking at her so strangely—by meeting every look of hers till she could but answer his questions with a gaze directed to the floor?

Had he quarrelled with Rosamond, and was he paying her attention out of a spirit of revengeful jealousy? The thought made her colour mount, and her bosom heave. But no, he was not ungenerous, and he—he had never demonstrated very plainly an affection for her guardian's daughter, and had often addressed her, Avice, in a peculiar tone of voice before—a tone which had set her thinking more about him than she had a right to think.

Sometimes she had even thought that he did not love Rosamond at all—he took so little heed of her—and now she felt assured of it, for when her name was mentioned he laughed lightly, and said:

"I am afraid Miss Rosamond has won the grandee's

heart, for young Mr. Hern looks thoughtful, and dances much with her ; come, you are an observer, Miss Avice, do you not think, with me, that Miss Stanmore has made a decided conquest ? ”

“ I hope not,” replied Avice, sadly.

“ Why do you hope not ? ” he cried, surprised.

“ An unfitting match—it would prove a bitter union in the end,” said Avice, mournfully, “ and—but we are deciding upon Rosamond’s fate, and giving her a betrothed with a grave earnestness that is ridiculous.”

“ They are forming sets for the ‘ Caledonians,’ ” said Clifton, “ your favourite quadrille. If it is not too encroaching on my part, might I again ask you to honour me ? ”

Avice hardly knew what to say ; she had an objection to dancing twice in succession with the same partner—it attracted attention, and gave rise to comments, not always of the gentlest—therefore she hesitated.

“ Miss Hern, surely we are too old friends to study much the paltry etiquette of a ball-room,” said he entreatingly. “ Avice, I beg that you will not refuse me this dance ! ”

For the first time in his life, he called her by her Christian name without the prefix, “ Miss,” and she could never have believed that the mere utterance of it would have brought such a rush of blood to her face !

She rose and gave him her hand, saying with an effort :

“ Surely I cannot refuse, after this most urgent appeal, and so, to punish you, I am your most obedient.”

She would not let him utter one word in reply, but walked swiftly with him to her place, almost leading him, as it were, and making a host of irrelevant remarks, by which she contrived to wholly turn the subject of discourse.

Now “ Love Chases ” are singular things, and engender a great deal of excitement, sometimes turning the head completely, and bringing on aberration of the brain. So Clifton, in the new chase which he had commenced, entered so earnestly into the pursuit that he was carried away by the flood of conflicting emotions, and really for that evening loved Avice, and thought there was not a dearer girl under the sun. He forgot all about Rosamond, Arnold Hern, even the figures of his quadrille, and stumbled about, and got wrong partners, and acted like a martyr to that universal passion over which a blind little rascal exercises

supreme jurisdiction. He had always had a studied respect, almost a veneration for Avice ; and now he thought that he must be in love, he had all the symptoms so strong.

Is it any wonder then that his manner deceived Avice—clear-sighted, sharp little Avice—and bewildered her, and made her head and her heart ache, and her temples throb in wild unison with both ; and yet amidst all, to filter through the chaos of everything, such a sense of deep happiness, undefined shadowy happiness, that a word would have drawn a torrent of tears from her dark downcast eyes.

The fact is, though Edward Clifton is no hero to the reader—the artful reader who is in the secret of the diary, and has already summed up his character, yet he had always been a hero to our heroine, and the artificial side turned to the world was an attractive one, with its book-learning, its reflectiveness, its courtesousness, its everything ; Avice estimated him as a very talented young man, and saw all his bright qualities and none of his dark ones—a one-sided view that is always deceptive, and leads to much toil and trouble when a change of position shows the wrong side of the idol, and the idol itself lies shattered for ever.

Avice judged by her heart and not by her mind, and the heart is always one-sided. It was the first mistake in her judgment of character, and though we pardon the misconception, we can but fear for the future.

The hours sped onward—one by one they drifted away, and the silver chimes of the timepieces scattered about the house, were drowned in the clash of the band, and the conversation of the guests. There were laughing faces crowding the ball-room, the card-room, and the terrace looking on the garden—even the garden itself was not without its wandering couples whose dark figures flitted about the distant walks.

They were on the terrace ; how they came there is of no consequence to the historian ; but there were Avice and Mr. Clifton, Avice in her cloak and hood, and Mr. Clifton not without his hat this time. There were some thirty or forty of the guests pacing up and down the wide stone pavement, or leaning over the balustrades and gazing at the garden beneath. One young man, evidently suffering from a fit of jealousy, was moping on the first steps that led to the garden, and another, in figure very much like Sir James

Fishfin, was surveying the glittering stars in the dusky blue sky, and quoting poetry from Tennyson's "Princess."

Avice wished that she had not come to see after Rosamond when they were on the terrace, though the scented summer air was refreshing after the hot rooms they had quitted, and the gardens were prettily illuminated, and the company kept her from feeling lonely, for all the extent of the terrace over which the groups were scattered. Yet she trembled when he spoke, and trembled more when he was silent; and his voice had grown very hoarse and uncontrollable.

"I do not see Rosamond—let us return," said Avice.

"One moment, Miss Hern—Avice," he said, in strange unnatural tones. "I implore you to hear but a few words."

"Let us go into the ball-room, Mr. Clifton," entreated the agitated Avice; "I cannot listen to anything here. There is nothing to say that may not be said within the house."

"There is everything!" he exclaimed, giving way to the promptings of the moment. "There is everything to hinder me confessing in that heartless crowd, the devotion of my life, the—"

Avice drew the hood almost completely over her face, and struggled to release her hand from his arm, and fly back to the ball-room.

"This is not right—this is cruel, Mr. Clifton," she exclaimed in faltering tones. "You must not detain me—I cannot listen—it would be unmaidenly. Sir, I entreat you to let me return to the house, or to escort me thither. Sir, I beg of you as a gentleman."

"Why this excitement and alarm, dear Avice?" said Clifton; "one word,—I ask but one! I do not build upon your love now, I am not worthy of the boon, but the consent to strive and—"

"I will not listen, now," cried Avice, resisting each attempt to stay. "It is so sudden—so—"

She liberated her hand by a hasty jerk and flew panting wildly along the terrace, and through the curtained doorway, straight into the arms of Walter Hern, who was emerging from the ball-room.

"Hallo! here," he cried, "what Avice, niece—what's all this? Why you're as white as a ghost—what's up?"

"Nothing, nothing," replied Avice, faintly; "yet I, I—am

not very well; if you would be kind enough to see me to my guardian, or Miss Stanmore. Thank you!"

Walter Hern offered her his arm, and Avice leaned on it for support. He conducted her with a proud step—for he felt honoured by the request, through the ball-room in search of some of her party.

He did not ask any further questions respecting her alarmed appearance, but with a bewildered expression of countenance slowly led her into the next apartment.

Rosamond was with her father in the card-room, and the latter had just risen from the table, and was yawning visibly.

Avice, fearful of Walter Hern making a rough communication to Mr. Stanmore and Rosamond which might alarm them, and compel an explanation of her own strange manner, said hastily,

"Thank you—I see them at the further end of the room. I will not detain you longer, Mr. Hern."

She withdrew her hand from his arm, and hurried towards her friends.

"Well, Avice," said Mr. Stanmore, "you look as scared as a mouse—is anything the matter?"

"I feel a little faint," she replied, "that is all."

"My dear Avice, you have had a fright!" cried Rosamond, anxiously. "Does she not look white, papa?"

"The rooms are very hot," murmured Avice.

"Come into the refreshment rooms with me, girls," said Stanmore, offering each an arm; "you both have been dancing too desperately. Oh! you silly maidens who never know when to stop. Oh! you delicate creatures, who go through half a dozen labours of Hercules in waltzes, polkas, and other abominations."

In a few minutes, Avice had recovered her composure, although her face did not regain its natural colour for the remainder of the evening. She saw no more of Mr. Clifton till after the grand supper was over—that was past midnight, and the visitors were crowding on the terrace to see the fireworks. Rosamond and Avice were still with Mr. Stanmore, and Mr. Arnold Hern had the honour of escorting Miss Jane, and consequently formed one of their party. Mr. Clifton, looking rather pale himself, joined them and commenced a dialogue with the ex-secretary, although he was

standing by the side of Avice, who trembled violently and looked intently in another direction.

The fireworks began, they were very pretty and expensive, and it must have cost Mr. Hern a fortune in rockets and red fire ; but amongst the very refined section of the company, ladies and gentlemen who kept their town houses and moved in a circle of which Mr. Hern knew nothing, there was a sense of repugnance to this portion of the evening's entertainments, and many white pairs of shoulders shrugged themselves beneath cloaks and mantles, and many a manly pair of eyes were upturned to the heavens when there was not a rocket in the sky.

But Walter Hern knew nothing of this, and thought this juvenile part of his fête the most aristocratic of all. He stood hanging half over the parapet clapping his hands, bawling vociferously his communications to the men on the grass plot, who were wandering about with long rods tipped with a blue light for the convenience of ignition, shouting bravo ! at the top of his lungs, and nudging his neighbours in the side with his powerful elbows.

"My father suffers a great deal from excitement," said Arnold, in an apologetic manner to the Stanmores, "there is no controlling him on occasions like this. Besides," with a forced laugh, "he has not been sparing the wine."

Arnold was right, his father had not been sparing of it ; he had drunk wine with almost every lady and gentleman at supper, he had had a fair quantity before supper, and he had imbibed two very strong glasses of brandy and water prior to venturing into the night air, and the *tout ensemble* had rendered him unsteady on his legs, and brought out the distinguishing traits of his character to admirable advantage.

He laughed, he sang snatches of songs that no member of the company had ever heard before, and full of words which were not in any edition of an English dictionary—he clapped the gentlemen on the back and called them "old cocks" and "bucks" and "trumps"—he insisted upon offending the dignity of the baronet's sister by pointing out a device that cost him "forty pun—hic" with one arm around her waist, an action which shocked Miss Jane Stanmore as much as the lady chiefly interested ; he shrieked for the servants to bring wine out on the terrace, and kept swearing that there were more fireworks if the people would only stop to see

them, long after the last bang had roused Sanderstone echoes, and the last rocket had mocked at the silent white stars twinkling over the garden of the Hall.

Arnold became frantic with rage at his father's humiliation in the eyes of his guests, and suddenly dropping the hand of Miss Jane in an unceremonious manner, he strode to his noisy sire, clutched him by the back of the neck, marched him down the terrace steps, despite his opposition, took him along the garden, through a paved yard, and thrust him in at the kitchen doors, bidding some of the servants, with an oath, fetch the valet to take care of him.

Walter Hern blustered for a few minutes, then sat down on a wooden chair by the dresser, mumbling, "Well, if you think I am not quite fit, Arnold boy!" and soon afterwards fell asleep, and was seen no more that night by the company.

Meanwhile the guests, many of whom had a long distance to go, were thinning, and the Stanmores amongst the rest were waiting in the hall for their carriage. Arnold was just in time to dart into the hall and say good-night—to apologise to Miss Jane Stanmore for his abrupt retirement, and to shake hands with all of them, with Rosamond last, whose little white hand stole from beneath her cloak, and timidly rested in his, and was then rather hastily withdrawn.

Mr. Clifton once more stood by Avice's side, and she had not the courage to look him in the face, even then.

"Mr. Stanmore's carriage!"

"I shall call to-morrow, Avice," he said, in a deep low voice, "call to-morrow on your guardian."

Avice wanted to say something, but not a word rose in her stifled throat.

"Good-night," said he, offering his hand.

Avice, with some difficulty, repeated "good-night," and gave him her hand, which he fervently pressed, and resigned. A moment after he had disappeared. Stanmore looked round.

"What, has Clifton gone?" said he. "That's strange, I thought that he was here just now. Quite a Will o' the Wisp to-night. Well, we shall see him to-morrow—now ladies, the carriage waits."

They were in the carriage and rolling away, past the glare of lighted windows, the mounted grooms who were again in the avenues, and at the gates, along the country road, dark and barren with its black hedgerows, and its gloomy trees.

"A very pleasant evening," said Miss Jane, "eh, brother?"

"Oh, very!" said he, "the guests very grand, the preparations very extensive and magnificent, the fireworks very beautiful, and our worthy host very drunk."

"Ahem!" coughed Miss Jane Stanmore, who asked no more questions of her brother concerning the party the rest of the journey home.

No chat by the fireside after the party between Avice Hern and Rosamond Stanmore, no gossiping of what had happened, or of how each of them had spent her evening, and been amused or otherwise! There was no fire to chat before in the warm summer time, and the hour was very late. Avice fancied that she could see the grey dawn streaking the East as she looked out of the window and drew aside the blind.

Each of them might have had those burning thoughts which wait on first love, and which are too deep in the early flush of their waking to be confided to another—though that other be the dear friend, and the old confidante in whom all past joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, were entrusted, and who gave back her own heart's outpourings in return.

Arnold's love might not have progressed quite so rapidly as Clifton's; though Rosamond nestling in her sleepless couch, thought of the Hall, the dance, and of him who pressed her hand as they waited for the carriage.

And Avice?

She knelt at the bedside and sobbed violently, her face buried in her hands.

The blind was still drawn aside, and the stars were glittering in upon her.

Did she think of him all that long hour, in which she crouched at the bed's foot and cried so passionately? was her grief all sorrow, or was it that emotion born of an awakened tenderness, which so tumultuously wars upon the heart-strings, and makes the first knowledge of being loved, a happiness that finds vent in incomprehensible tears?

Poor Wildflower! the stars that shine so coldly down upon thee, in the first hours of that morning, are the type of the flame of love thou hast awakened—a feeble light glittering from the background of a hollow and mysterious Immensity.

CHAPTER V

CLIFTON'S DIARY.

"July 7, 18—.

"I HAVE written myself a fool in these blurred pages—a blind fool, groping in an eternal darkness. There is a sterner name more worthy of me now, whether I have the courage to brand it in this record, or shrink from its appalling truth.

"And why shrink? This book written not for others, the history of my second self—the grim confessional to which I bow my head, and recite stories not meant for the world's ear or the world's opinion—stories of an inner life—should be a transcript of myself, not a mere artificial chronicle which the stranger might read unblushingly. What cowardice holds back my hand? what ready knavery prompts extenuating circumstances as I stand at the bar of my own tribunal in this secret chamber? The truth—the truth! I am a VILLAIN! a villain whose distorted mind judges for all ill, with views of right compressed and narrowed, and with a lust for evil that is illimitable.

"Good God! what have I done? Have I, in the wild fury of the senses, battling with the turmoil of a maddening jealousy, led away by a wild excitement, confessed my love with a lying passion, and with a fervour which I did not feel? Have I found in the hidden depths of Avice Hern's pure nature an affection for a wretch who has not the heart to reciprocate it, or give love for love after his own hypocrisy has betrayed her secret?

"I have offered her my hand, and lost every chance of her to whom I have been devoted from a child. I have sought the stranger of my own free will, and cut off for a taunt the hope of the future—hope alike of my boyhood and manhood!

"How do I know Rosamond loves me not? What test is there of the warmth of affection till the affection is tried, and the love is eagerly sought?

"But it is too late! For ever before me, shining out of the gloom, mocking me with its brilliancy, gleam the letters

of fire—‘TOO LATE!’ I see them everywhere—they follow my pen—they are driving me mad!

* * * * *

“Let me resume this confession. The time for morbid raving has gone, the calm reflection of a man who has given his honest word is necessary. The philosopher would assure me that I have chosen for the best, school me with his cold arguments of the superiority of mind, and show me what a delusive phantom beauty is, and how it allures but to ensnare.

“The philosopher is right. In Avice Hern I shall find a mind that can look into my own—a companion of whose presence I shall never tire, and whose loving gentleness has ever been a household word. More—I shall be assured of her love; and the very trustfulness with which that love will be confided in me, will soon erase the traces of the first wound—leaving not even a scar on my heart.

“Beautiful she is not; but attractive she is. One forgets her face when she speaks; though it lights up with life, and is a face one might love.

“It will be my duty never to so wring her heart as to lead her to believe that I did not love her when I offered my hand. Nay! it will be my duty to love her, to cherish the warm feelings which are at present unworthily bestowed, and a hand of iron shall crush every recollection of the past that causes me to think less of my betrothed.

“It cannot be said that money held out its attractions, and gold added fabulous charms to the heiress, or that unsurpassing beauty took away the command of sober reason. She will believe that I have sought her for herself.

“Let her believe that, and she will be happy; and if a life’s devotion be an atonement for last night’s injury, it shall be forthcoming in her destined husband.

“As time throws its green mantle of moss o’er the ruin, adding a charm indescribable to the wreck it has made, so the years that are to come will steal silently on, throwing their veil over that first love, the temple of which has sunk down in the storm!”

CHAPTER VI.

ENGAGED.

MR. STANMORE was in the study of Olverton House, deep in the compilation of his great work on "The State." The morning after the fête at the Hall was not a bright day for him, and the sun shone through the large bay window, and wooed him in vain to the fields and country lanes, offering its restorative from headaches and morbid depressions, contrasting the fair undulating country without, with the rows of book-laden shelves, the library table, and the litter of manuscripts within.

Mr. Stanmore paid great attention to his work that particular morning, he consulted the heavy parliamentary debates—those driest of dry back numbers—with fixed intensity of purpose; he wrote hurriedly and straightforwardly, as if "up" in his subject, he darted his pen into the inkstand and out again, with that smart business air so like unto the old office days of Whitehall and Board Rooms—ten till four days, which in all probability were never more for him. He sighed once, as if he regretted their extinction.

A tap without.

"Come in."

A servant opened the door, and said, "Mr. Clifton desires a few minutes speech with you, Sir."

"Is he alone?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Where are the ladies?"

"They have gone out, Sir."

"Oh! tell him to come up."

The servant retired.

Mr. Stanmore put his pen aside, and lay back in his chair, awaiting the arrival of his young friend.

"Ah! Clifton," said Mr. Stanmore, as he entered, "excuse my study and these evident signs of an industrious pen; we literary fellows," with a laugh, "must go to work in a fair spirit at times."

"The State, I presume?"

"Oh! yes, 'The State,' it's a terrible affair—take a seat, Edward."

Edward Clifton drew a chair near the table, and sat down with an embarrassed air.

"You are not much the better man for yesternight's change of scene," remarked Mr. Stanmore, with a keen glance at him, "you look pale, and as black as Erebus round the eyes; anything the matter?"

"No, Sir! that is—" he stopped and unconsciously fidgeted with the manuscript sheets, "no, nothing."

"Glad to hear it, Clifton," said Stanmore, "but don't pull those papers about more than you can help, there's a good fellow, I have been half the morning sorting them."

"I beg pardon," cried Clifton, in some confusion.

Mr. Stanmore bestowed a second glance at his companion. Clifton's face was very pale, his eyes bloodshot, his whole appearance that of a man, suffering from inward excitement, a man jaded, haggard and full of thought.

"Come, come, Clifton," said Stanmore, kindly, "you have something to tell me; no beating about the bush with old friends, so out with it. Now, I am all attention," folding his arms together, "proceed."

"Mr. Stanmore," said Clifton, "I have come to make a revelation, and also a request."

"Go on," said the *ci-devant* secretary, nodding his head.

"My revelation will startle you, my dear Sir," commenced Clifton, forcing a smile.

"Perhaps not," Stanmore replied, meaningly.

"Our years of friendship, my constant intercourse with yourself and family, Mr. Stanmore," continued Clifton, "have led to a very natural result, and the respect that I have long entertained for one of the most accomplished members of your circle, has ripened into a warmer sentiment, which I could not foster in strict honour, if you were ignorant of my feelings towards Miss Hern."

Mr. Stanmore who had been attentively listening to every word, gave a start of surprise at the mention of his ward's name, and looked up with a cry of "Miss Hern—Avice!"

Clifton evaded the searching look of his old friend, and said in a fine clear voice,

"Long acquainted with her priceless worth, thrown into constant companionship with her, seeing her almost every

day, I—I could but learn to love her, and I have come hither this morning to place my confidence in you, to ask your consent as her guardian, to consider me her acknowledged suitor, and her future husband. You listen, Sir.”

“Yes, yes, I listen,” said Mr. Stanmore in a hurried manner; “acknowledged suitor—future husband! I hear every word, Sir.”

“And your reply, Mr. Stanmore?” asked Clifton.

The guardian wrapped the dressing-gown tightly round him, as though he were cold, and made so long a pause that Clifton glanced at him with some astonishment.

“How long has this attachment subsisted between you?” he asked, “I say between you, presuming that Miss Hern is aware of the communication you have made to me, and is not averse to the acceptance of your attentions.”

He spoke as if he were measuring every word he uttered.

“The time, Sir,” said Clifton, with a flushed cheek, “the time—is—indefinite, it dates from no fixed period.”

“How long has Miss Hern acknowledged you her lover?” said Stanmore, in the same measured tone.

“I—I never made known the real state of my feelings until last night at the fête,” said Clifton, “then carried away by my passion, I confessed and—”

“And had reason to believe that your love was not rejected by my ward,” concluded Stanmore. “Mr. Clifton,” after a long pause, “you have my full consent.”

He extended his hand frankly, and for a moment the young man grasped it in his.

“Mr. Clifton, you have chosen well,” said Stanmore, “nay more, in all England, much less in Sanderstone, you could not have chosen better. Candidly, you have surprised me, for I had not the slightest idea that you were in love with Miss Hern, or had looked upon her in any light save that of an old friend, but the freemasonry of unacknowledged lovers is something so delicate, and makes itself known by such slight looks and words, that I might well have been in ignorance of the sympathy awakened in the heart of Avicce. I, whose ideas of love are old fashioned, and whose own heart is slow to appreciate the depth and warmth of younger ones about me! Is your mother aware of your intentions?”

“I shall inform her upon my return, Mr. Stanmore.”

“She should have been consulted—she may have objections.”

"Objections, Sir!" cried Clifton, "impossible."

"Miss Hern is not your equal in a worldly point of view, Mr. Clifton, of that you are probably aware?"

"I am, Sir."

"You are of the higher order of wooers, Edward," said Stanmore, with a faint smile. "I am glad to see it. There is the chivalric suitor and the worldly suitor for the nineteenth century—the former with a spotless banner, and his motto of 'Love alone,' the latter with his squires and armour-bearers, and his war-cry of 'Gold the Conqueror!' Clifton, you are no carpet knight."

"Miss Hern is a treasure in herself, Mr. Stanmore."

"True—true!"

They regarded each other for some time, in silence, then Stanmore said—

"I am detaining you from Avice, you will find her and the Misses Stanmore somewhere in the fields, you know their haunts better than I, friend Clifton."

Clifton rose.

"We shall see you this evening?"

"I thank you—yes."

"Good-morning, Clifton, my best wishes, good-morning."

Clifton retired, and Stanmore remained in the same position, facing the empty chair as though the suitor for the hand of his ward still sat before him.

It was a long, long hour he remained thus, his brow contracted, his lips set firmly, his arms crossed on his chest, his only movement now and then a hand sweeping back the hair from his forehead like a man waking from a dream.

The sunlight went stealing along the room, the golden beams shifted from the desk and table, and fell upon his face; a small bronze timepiece on the mantelshelf, told of sixty minutes wasted in vain reverie, yet there he still sat, careworn and stern and thoughtful.

The ladies came home, they had missed Mr. Clifton in their return, and Rosamond playfully tapped at his study door as she passed, and asked if 'The State' had not received fitting consideration for that especial day?"

"Not quite, Rosamond," he answered; "presently, my child, presently."

Visitors dropped in, gentlemen with kind inquiries after the ladies, and amongst them Walter Hern and Arnold; but

he sent down his excuses, stating that business of great importance confined him for that day to his study. He declined luncheon, but went down to dinner, and after passing through the old formula, rose to return.

"Oh! no more of that terrible study to-day, papa," implored Rosamond, as he rose.

"My dear, why not?"

"You have been locked in that odious dusty room all the long day," she said, pouting. "'The State' should have respite."

"To-morrow, then—to-morrow," said he. "My papers require arranging before I put them away, my child. I give you my honour that I will not touch them to-morrow."

"The morrow never comes," said Miss Jane.

"A wise aphorism, and too true, though hackneyed," he said. "The morrow never comes—right, never!"

He stood with his hand upon the door.

"Avice!"

Avice looked up at the mention of her name.

"Will you be kind enough to come to my study at a leisure moment, Avice?" he said. "I will not detain you long."

Avice murmured "Yes," and looked down rosy red.

"Not now—in an hour or two—at your own time."

At her own time, after Mr. Clifton had gone home again—after two ineffectual attempts to cross the landing, Avice went to the study door, and knocked gently against its panels.

Mr. Stanmore opened the door, led her to a seat, and taking another himself, dashed into the one engrossing topic with his old light air.

"So, Miss Hern, so you must go losing your little heart before I hardly thought it capable of a genuine impression," said he, "go falling in love before nineteen summers have made a woman of you, with that scapegrace young fellow from the Shrubby." "

Avice replied but by her blushes.

"Mr. Clifton has told you of his interview with me?"

"Yes, Sir," she faltered out.

"And my sister and daughter, are they aware of this engagement?"

"They guess it; but I—I intend to tell them all to-night," said Avice,

"I did not think there would be so soon a sign of losing you," said he, his voice suddenly becoming very deep toned. "I had hoped my little Wildflower was destined to gladden Olverton House for many a long year. But there comes a keen judge of a gentle woman, who threatens to take her from us, and give her a house of her own. I trust that house may be a happy home, and its owner a good husband when the time comes. I do not doubt it, knowing him and you."

Avice rested her arms on the table, and bowing her head upon them, cried, not with happiness, but in the fullness of her heart.

Stanmore gazed at the weeping figure, with an emotion that he could scarce conceal, and after a moment's silence, said :

"And there is but little fear of Avice not making him a good wife, I think," said he, "a dutiful considerate wife, who will obey too much, and act too strictly to the letter of her troth : 'Wife and husband !' they are strange words, yet, Avice, are they not ?"

"Oh ! yes, yes," she answered, without looking up. "I cannot think of them."

"Come, come, these tears are out of season, ward," said he. "Dry your eyes, and rejoin the ladies. They will think that I have been scolding you. When is the marriage to come off ?"

"Oh ! do not talk of marriage, dear Sir," cried Avice ; "we have not thought of that. I do not wish it yet for years. All is so new and strange, and it has come so suddenly upon me, his confession," she said, hastily brushing away the traces of her emotion, "that I feel and act more like a weak child, and am unconscious of half I do or say. You will excuse me, dear guardian, will you not ?"

"If excuse be necessary, which it is not, Avice," he replied. "How singular the changes of this life are in contradistinction to what we have anticipated. Do you know, ward mine, the fancy picture that I sketched to myself, years ago ? No ? I will tell you."

He drew a long breath, and said :

"I built up, piece by piece, this scene. Edward Clifton a young man and a suitor for my daughter Rosamond—Rosamond accepting him—Rosamond his wife ! I thought

young Clifton a fitting match for her ; and that diversity of disposition would make them happy in each other. I thought Avice Hern would have been a good sister to him, and that her qualifications of mind—that's all—were to much akin to his to offer any of those attractions for which man seeks a wife. You will pardon me for thinking this, Avice, I am sure. The reality has proved my mistake, and set aside my theory that opposite natures are attracted ; that the rule of a great science is a rule in love—that like repels like, and the positive and negative virtues have but affinity."

"Do you think I am so much like Ed—Mr. Clifton in my pursuits and tastes, guardian ?" asked Avice.

"There is a similarity, I think," said he, "not enough," he added, with a laugh, "to set you flinging the poker and tongs at each other, and skirmishing with the fire-shovel before the honeymoon has waned. I do not assert that as a fact for the future, Avice."

"May I ask a question ?"

"Certainly."

"And what picture did you sketch for me, when Rosamond's portrait was finished, and but the framework wanting ? You see that I am getting jealous, Mr. Stanmore."

"What picture ?" he repeated, evasively. "What picture, curious Avice ?"

"Yes, Sir."

He was silent for some minutes ; then he said :

"You must not be offended."

"Oh ! no," cried Avice. "Offended !"

"Well, your picture was—was a neat, prim little maid, for ever a maid, with a favourite cat, a pet parrot, and a horror of wet weather, and damp feet," he said, lightly, "growing old-fashioned in time, and taking to spectacles with the finest of steel frames—such as Titania might have worn when company was not expected in the evening—an old maid fond of books and tinged with blue-stockingsism, but a very agreeable lady for all that, taking care of a white-headed gentleman, subject to gout and dyspepsia and occasionally tripping over to the Shrubby, and bringing him back a pair of rosy grandchildren. Heigho ! what dreamers we are all. Here's Avice Hern going to be married, and Rosamond must be the maid for ever and a day, and nurse her father into dotage."

For all the flippant air that he had assumed, Avice felt a sensation of pain at his speech, felt that he was in pain when he uttered it.

"But is Mr. Clifton the only eligible young man in or near Sanderstone, Mr. Stanmore?" she said smiling. "Why, dear guardian, you are a father very hard to please."

"Perhaps the only young man fit for Rosamond, and to whom I would entrust her," said Mr. Stanmore. "The suitor must be quite a hero of romance—one of G. P. R. James's heroes, in fact, to please me and gain my consent. But leave me to my 'State'—I'm busy, Avice—good-night."

And with this abrupt conclusion to his familiar discourse, he took up his pen and dipped it in the ink. Avice rose. Before she quitted the room, he had commenced writing, and he looked not up from his paper, or took his pen from it, till his ward had left the study, and shut him in with his books and manuscripts, and parliamentary debates of twenty, thirty, fifty years ago.

And twenty, thirty, fifty years added to his looks, could not have given him deeper lines or marked his face with so intense a care as fell upon it when the door closed on Avice, and the pen dropped from his rigid fingers, and fell unheeded to the floor.

There was another task for Avice, the story of the engagement to Miss Jane Stanmore and Rosamond. She got through it very well for all her faltering voice, and shed no more tears over it. It was time to set about feeling happy now, to think of what a dear young man Edward was, and how she loved him, and how grateful she ought to be for having won a heart like his—she with her plain face, and black staring eyes, who was scarcely fit for anything but the Island of Liliput.

Rosamond's hand sought Avice's during the recital, and clasped it within her own; she looked intensely thoughtful, and once or twice sighed heavily—sighed almost as deeply as if she had been in love with him herself.

Perhaps the remembrance of the last evening when Clifton sat by her side, sneering at everything and commenting bitterly on all she did and said, suggested an inkling of the truth and helped to freeze her congratulations, prompting that strange unfathomable look as she kissed Avice passion-

ately, and hoped that her engagement would be a happy one, and only less happy than her marriage.

Miss Jane expressed her intense surprise, but kissed her too, in a snappish, biting style, and said,

"I should never have thought of such a thing—Avice, too, dear me! what a very unaccountable young man Mr. Clifton is."

So it was settled; Avice was engaged, and though she knew it not, had come into her Wrongs!

And we all have a fair share of Wrongs in our passage through life, and happy is he or she who can uphold them when they press on to reality, sinking not with despair beneath the burden of trouble.

From the first rock of the cradle to the last sigh on the death-bed, the Wrongs come to the light, stealing onwards like the mist of the morning, or deepening suddenly over a life to be darkened for years. 'Tis not wealth will evade them, or its power go far to soften the shock of their coming—the Wrongs touch the heart, and it is not the red gold that will be balm to the spirit.

There is the Ocean of Wrong, as well as the dew-drop—but there is the strong arm to breast the sea, as well as the light hand to brush care from the rose-leaf.

And remember, O unfortunate, when the sea appears boundless, and the light of the beacon is quenched in the wave, that the Wrong will be Right where the day is eternal, and over earth spreads the Heaven where no Wrongs can abide!

B O O K V.

Bel. If love be treasure, we'll be wondrous rich ;
I have so much, my heart will surely break with 't ;
Vows can't express it. When I would declare
How great's my joy, I'm dumb with the big thought.

OTWAY'S "VENICE PRESERVED."

Act. I.

"Roderick, enough ! enough !" he cried,
"My daughter cannot be thy bride."

SCOTT'S "LADY OF THE LAKE."

Canto H.

CHAPTER I.

MR. STANMORE GOES TO LONDON.

MR. STANMORE is going to London. He offers no reason for his departure, and evades explanation in that peculiar manner which, feigning to satisfy the questioner, but serves to bewilder and confound.

"To London!" says Miss Jane Stanmore, flinging up her hands, "and bless my soul, what for?"

"To London!" exclaim Rosamond and Avice, looking their inquiries.

"Business, sister—business, my dears," replies Mr. Stanmore, "important affairs which it is useless to bother your small brains about. Land-tax, 'The State,' unpaid bills, and so forth. Every reason for going to London, you see, girls, eh?"

He waits some time for an answer, but they are silent and thoughtful.

"We all require a change of scene, a variation from the routine of every day," continues Mr. Stanmore. "I have been too long at Olverton House, and am growing rusty. Sometimes I have almost an uncontrollable wish to seek my old companions—make acquaintance with the musty papers, mammoth folios, and government despatches, once more—in fact, go back to work like an apprentice after his holiday."

"I don't believe that you think of any such nonsense," affirms his sister.

"Why not, Jane?" asked her brother.

"Because, only last month—"

"Last month?" interrupts her brother, "do you know how many days there are in a month, and how many hours in those days, and how a minute—one drop in the sea of time—will suffice to alter all the resolutions of past years? Don't talk about last month, for Heaven's sake! What have we not lost since last month?"

"Lost!" exclaims the wondering Rosamond.

"Yes, all of us—even Avice, here, who has lost her

heart to Edward Clifton, and I who have lost an undutiful ward."

"Undutiful?" says Avice.

"Did you not fall in love with the scapegrace before you had my permission to fall in love at all, and was not that undutiful?—there, don't blush, it's all correct enough, and now," with a laugh, "you must suffer the terrible pain of losing me!"

"But for a few days, I hope, papa," says Rosamond.

"I never fix a time for anything—there are so many invisible hands guiding, misleading, threatening. I may be gone a week, or a— but I have not gone yet, have I?"

Mr. Stanmore, generally so precise in his movements, and methodical in any plans formed and waiting to be carried out, keeps not up his character in the last determination he has arrived at, and although preparations are made and his boxes and portmanteau are heaped up in the hall, yet he lingers day after day at Olverton House, and seems unresolved whether to go or stay. One morning he orders the carriage, and then countermands it with a sharp, "to-morrow." One day he will remain with his sister, Rosamond, and Avice, in the best of temper, at another, he is closely locked in his study with the papers of "The State" before him.

At times, his whole manner changes, his brow contracts, his lips compress, and he is either sullen and repellent, or so bitterly sarcastic, that one dare not ask a question for fear of the harshness of the reply.

In one of his dark humours he goes away at last, coldly kissing the foreheads of the three ladies, who follow him to the hall, and smiling grimly when they offer their wishes for a pleasant journey to him.

With one foot upon the carriage steps, he says in answer to his daughter's request to write early from town :

"What good will my writing letters do you, Rosamond? Why should I waste my time scrawling sheet after sheet with the commonplace news of the day? You will have the 'Times' every morning!"

"But of yourself?"

"Of me!" with a low laugh, "no, no, I never write in the first person—that would be more dull and vapid than the news."

"Shall I write?" asks Rosamond, timidly.

"There is no occasion," he answers; "I have not settled on my hotel, and letters would but miscarry. Good-bye!"

He steps into the carriage, and sits reflecting. The coachman waits the signal to proceed. Mr. Stanmore speaks again.

"I do not want the Herns too much at Olverton House during my absence, sister," says he, addressing Jane; "it may be as well to hint as much, I think."

Miss Stanmore mumbles an unintelligible reply

"If it had not been so dull for you, Avice," says he, "I might have taken Rosamond with me—yet, Rosamond has other thoughts than for her father and his company—bad at the best of times as that is! Drive on; the Branscombe railway station, James—good-bye!"

He draws the blind before the open window as the carriage moves on, leaving Miss Jane and Avice standing in surprise, and Rosamond looking down with the big tears in her eyes.

"I do really believe Arthur wished Rosamond to accompany him," exclaims Miss Jane; "but why didn't he say so—the foolish man? What nonsense!"

And giving her head a sharp little toss, she leaves the two girls standing in the hall.

"Do you think papa wanted me to go to London with him, Avvy?" asks Rosamond.

"I did not think so till this morning," Avice replies, sadly.

"Then how could I be expected to think," says Rosamond; "I who think so little, Avice dear? Heigho! I wish my dear papa had not gone away so cross."

So Mr. Arthur William Stanmore goes to London, and it is a day, a week, and then a fortnight since they watched his departure from the great entrance door.

Perhaps the one who misses Mr. Stanmore most, is Avice Hern. She feels that he is gone twenty times a day; even when Edward has dropped in of an evening, she cannot forget it, and occasionally turns to the favourite chair—we all have a favourite chair—as if expecting to see the tall, upright form of her guardian ensconced therein, listening with his grave smile, or lost in his own reverie.

Miss Jane is rather more important now; she feels that

she is sole head of the establishment, and worries the domestics more than usual, in order to give her delegated authority full exercise,—and Rosamond must have something on her mind—perhaps her father's words at parting, she is so very thoughtful !

Mrs. Clifton occasionally accompanies her son to Olverton House, and pays Avice much attention—rather more than appears to come naturally from her, perhaps.

The truth is, Mrs. Clifton is disappointed in her son's choice—like Mr. Stanmore, she had hoped Rosamond would have received the offer of his hand—her darling boy's ! and not that sedate little mouse, Miss Hern—though certainly, *she* is very fond of her Edward.

It is of no moment to this history to inquire if Mrs. Clifton expressed much regret to her son upon his making known the object of his choice ; probably, she thought more than she gave voice to, and refrained from wounding him by any reference to her own wishes on the subject, fully convinced of a self-will in her dear Edward, which once directed to a given point could not be turned aside by any arguments which she might have to enforce. And though a son is rich enough to support a wife who has not a fortune in her own right, yet, we all find it a little vexing when the child into whose mind we have instilled fair notions of proper matches and good connections, rejects all his early teaching, and goes proposing to a Nobody when there's a real heiress on the other side of the way—don't you think so, mothers with grown-up sons ?

Mrs. Clifton makes the best of what she calls her son's imprudence, and sets herself to look upon Avice as a future daughter, forces her affection towards her despite that secret resistance which old views have created, and jogs along in a comfortable, if not in a contented manner.

Edward Clifton inwardly wishes his mother had been averse to the match, and resolved to offer all opposition and to act the tyrannical matron, refusing to listen to entreaty and menace—some little *contre-temps* would have spurred him on, and taught him to value more the prize for the difficulty there was in obtaining it. But it is all going on so smoothly—it cannot be the course of true love ! His mother gives consent, Mr. Stanmore gives consent, Avice is happy, never jealous, or rousing jealousy in him. It is all

so commonplace, so exceedingly mild. There is not the least excitement in the world. It's the broadest, smoothest road without a pebble turned edgeways, or a flint sharp side uppermost, that leads to Sanderstone church where they are to be married some day.

Avice is not fond of excitement, understands nothing of the dark shades of love which give tone to the whole landscape, and would rather always be happy, than have a desperate quarrel and the most delightful reconciliation. Quarrel, with Edward, too—preposterous ! Every day which is so like yesterday to Clifton—although he honestly seeks by all means in his power to repair his great error by the most earnest attention—is full of charming variety to the happy Avice. Edward has brought her a bouquet—Edward has given her his portrait—Edward has spoken of the future—that dazzling golden future of their lives, and though she sighs, yet how it makes her heart throb to think of the new fireside, the new home, that happy, happy home to come !

She writes to Martha Badge and tells her of the engagement that she has formed, and tries to paint with the tiresome cold steel pen what a handsome young man Mr. Clifton is—how clever—how good ! She writes so hurriedly, with such a trembling, hastening hand, and such a wild fluttering in her bosom, that the greater portion of the news is irretrievably lost, for neither Martha nor the butcher boy—that private secretary and amanuensis—can decipher a quarter of the description of Avice's beau-ideal, and after a serious quarrel over it, they both give the matter up in despair. Mrs. Badge wraps the letter in wool and lavender, and contents herself with the knowledge of her little Avvy being engaged to be married, but to whom, whether rich or poor, a gentleman or a journeyman-baker—the Lord only knows !

Walter Hern and his good looking son call at Olverton House, express their regret at Mr. Stanmore's absence and retire—call again the next evening, and the next, lingering half an hour later each night, till it becomes a regular event for the gentlemen at the Hall to spend the evening at Olverton House, much to the inward dissatisfaction of prudent Avice.

Miss Jane Stanmore receives them with every apparent

sign of welcome, dresses for them with scrupulous care and allows those bunches of crisp curls to droop on each side of her face, like the long ears of an antiquated spaniel.

And Rosamond? Well, she is not very cross about it either, and blushes when they come into the room, when they go away, and when Arnold speaks to her, which he often does, in so low a tone that a third person would attempt in vain to catch the argument, and is always confused and shy, and not unhappy—certainly not unhappy. Between Arnold and Avice there appears a secret antipathy, which lies hidden under a cold ceremonious deportment. They never meet face to face, but they seem reading thoughts antagonistic to each other.

Arnold is more respectful to Clifton, since his engagement to Avice, although the latter gentleman is abrupt or taciturn when they chance to meet at Olverton House. Clifton has a double duty to perform, which preys upon him and makes him haggard; to prove a love to her he but respects, and to hide all symptom of jealousy from her he still loves for all the past, for all his promise, for all his cruelly plighted troth.

Walter Hern is just the same every day, very rough, very boisterous in speech, more than commonly attentive to Miss Jane Stanmore, and partial to a talk with Clifton, who avoids it, about hounds and guns and horses.

Walter Hern feels sorry that Mr. Stanmore has left Sanderstone, unceremoniously; "he should have liked to have gone to London with him; they would have been capital chums, and not have told, ha! ha! ha! any tales about each other when they came back! Close as oysters by—"

So the ball goes round, whilst Mr. Stanmore is away; the colours varying and changing—the game of cross purposes getting more intricate, and its actors more interested in each other, with every revolution of the earth, on which they move and plan.

CHAPTER II.

ARNOLD HERN WINS THE GAME OF CLIFTON.

A FORTNIGHT following Mr. Stanmore's departure to London, during which period he had neither written nor been written to, Rosamond and Avice were seated at the breakfast table.

Miss Jane Stanmore had not yet risen for the day, and was regaling herself on chocolate and rolls in the sacred precincts of her chamber, attended by her maid, a poor nervous being, who had been worried and harassed to the last stage of skeletonism.

For the last few weeks, dating from the period of Avice's engagement to Mr. Clifton, the old habits of familiar discourse had imperceptibly ceased between the 'sisters,' and although both were too deep feeling and affectionate to fall off, for any slight pretext, from that fond regard which they entertained for each other, yet there was evidence of a weighty barrier that kept back confidence, and lay between them, a check upon those mutual confessions which they had been at one time so prone to make.

Avice's reserve probably originated from the reluctance which all highly sensitive minds have to force to a commonplace topic that affection, the depth of which is beyond gauge, and with Rosamond a reason equally as strong, perhaps, might have kept back a little story which was not much to coin into words, but which was a long history to her, although an undefinable and perplexing one.

Avice was very grave and thoughtful that morning, and Rosamond asked with anxiety the cause. "I do not know if it be my place to allude to it, dear Rosamond," said Avice. "I am not even certain of sparing your feelings, if I tell you the subject of my reflections."

Rosamond could not restrain the rising colour, as she looked at Avice and said,

"I am not fearful of the revelation, Avvy."

"Shall I go on?" asked Avice.

Rosamond nodded.

"I was thinking this morning, and I have been thinking

this week past of your father's words, the day he went to London. Do you remember them, sister ? ”

“ Concerning me ? ” inquired Rosamond.

“ Concerning the Herns,” said Avice, “ and their coming to this house so often. He expressed a wish that your aunt should delicately make known to them, that frequent visits in his absence were not in conformity with good breeding, and were not required—yet, Rosamond, they come every night.”

“ What can I do, Avvy dear ? ” replied Rosamond. “ What can my aunt do ? I—I did speak to aunt about it, and she said that she did not remember my father saying anything of the kind, and could not be rude enough to offend such intimate friends.”

“ Are they intimate friends of any in Olverton House, Rosamond ? ” asked Avice, with a searching look. “ I hope not for the sake of your own father—for the sake of us all.”

“ Oh ! Avice, you never liked them,” said Rosamond, “ you have always been prejudiced against them, you so impartial too ! ”

“ Rosamond, shall I tell you a secret ? ”

“ Oh ! no—no ! ” cried Rosamond, in a wild impetuous manner ; “ do not say anything more about the Herns, I do not like them myself ; they are not intimate friends of mine, indeed they are not. Oh ! talk of something else, dear, dear Avvy, do ! ”

Avice looked sadder than ever, and was silent.

“ When I say that you are prejudiced against them, Avice,” said Rosamond, continuing the subject of her own accord, to Avice's surprise, “ I mean you—you think of Walter Hern, your own father's brother, as you thought of him years ago, and of your cousin, to whom you seldom address a word, I believe you have still more uncharitable suspicions.”

“ It may be so,” said Avice, mournfully ; “ perhaps it is for the sake of Rosamond Stanmore that I am suspicious of the son.”

Rosamond did not ask why Avice was suspicious for *her* sake in particular. Avice continued :

“ And if I was Rosamond, I would rather believe the father, bad as I think he is, than Arnold Hern, whose life's

study is himself. If compelled to trust in one or another, which God forbid should be the fate of either of us! I would not hesitate one instant in my choice."

"Oh! Avice, Avice! you are saying this to—to—"

She did not finish the sentence, but hurriedly began another.

"But Arnold Hern is not all self: he can feel for another, Avice—for the poor. He found out Millthorn—poor Millthorn—listened to his story, pitied him, made him one of the head-gamekeepers, and gave him a cottage to live in on his own estate."

"When was that?" asked Avice in surprise. "I saw Katie on Monday last at the Hollow, and she told me nothing of it."

"Three days ago—Tuesday, Avice."

"Did *he* tell you this?"

"He made a casual remark about it, that was all."

Avice after reflection, said:

"I hope that I have judged my cousin falsely, Rosamond. I shall be glad to hear of many such deeds in his favour, though he trumpet them himself to charm a fair lady's ear, prating of his own brave actions as Othello, that egotistical Moor, prated to Desdemona. But not to win as Othello won, dear sister," added Avice, laying a hand upon Rosamond's as she rose. "Better anything than that. Let him be as charitable as Sir Charles Grandison, and as handsome as Narcissus, he will never be worthy of this little hand, will never prize or understand its owner, or give an undivided heart for hers in fair exchange. And more—"

She paused, and but continued when Rosamond raised her deep blue eyes inquiringly.

"And more," clasping the hand beneath her own, affectionately. "When the times comes to lose your heart, and before you give proof that it is in another's keeping, will you promise me, dear sister, to confide in me, and take the advice that I may have to offer?"

Rosamond made no reply.

"It is a great thing to promise, or for me to exact," continued Avice; "and I should have said *hear* my advice—not take it. I would not wish to influence you, unless—"

"Oh! Avice, say no more," implored Rosamond. "I,

cannot bear another word from even you to-day. Oh! leave me to myself. I am but fit for my own thoughts; and I am very—very miserable.”

She snatched the white hand from Avice and covered her swimming eyes.

“Rosamond,” said Avice, “I hope—I trust—”

“Think nothing against me, Avice,” cried Rosamond. “I am but tortured with my own thoughts. Do leave me, please. I shall be better when I am alone. When the time comes, and I have lost my heart,” she murmured, “my sister shall know all.”

Rosamond’s urgent entreaty could but have its weight with Avice, who slowly and sorrowfully left the room, and closed the door on her with a heavy sigh.

In the evening the Herns came as usual, but at so early an hour that they surprised Miss Jane, her niece, and Avice in the garden.

“The first time that I have had an opportunity of seeing the Stanmore property, ladies,” bawled Walter Hern, as he and Arnold advanced towards them; “so we wouldn’t wait for any stuck-up ceremony, but opened the glass doors and came down into the garden. By all that’s holy!” looking round, “it’s not so bad. How far does it extend?”

“A few hundred yards, Mr. Hern,” replied Miss Jane, simpering; “not like the boundless extent of the charming Hall. Good evening, Mr. Arnold.”

After salutations had been exchanged Walter Hern offered his escort to Miss Stanmore and Avice, saying with a hoarse laugh:

“That leaves Miss Rosamond to Arnold. They’ll get on pretty well together, and find something to talk about, I’ll lay a wager—eh! Miss Stanmore? eh! niece? I say, Avice?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“What do you and Mr. Clifton find to talk about when you get such a chance? ho! ho! ho! eh, niece? eh, niece?”

Walter Hern herewith exploded into one of those hilarious outbursts which invariably made Avice shudder, and even had a curdling effect on Mr. Stanmore’s sister, though she affirmed it was a genial and hearty laugh—thoroughly English.

Arnold and Rosamond did not hear the playful comments

of Walter Hern. They had remained by the side of a fountain on the lawn, talking about the beautiful evening, and the flowers, and the gold-fish glancing about the waters of the marble basin at their feet, whilst Walter had drawn the ladies, with diplomatic skill, in another direction.

"It's hardly too late for one stroll round the grounds," said Walter; "there's only a single star twinkling yet, and the dew is not heavy; so if you ladies will escort me, I should like to see the domains of Olverton. Another fountain! What makes Mr. Stanmore so precious fond of water-works?"

Avice gave a hasty look in the direction of Rosamond and Arnold. They had not moved from their first position, but were still standing by the fountain, Rosamond with a rose in her hand, which she seemed diligently inspecting as she plucked it leaf by leaf to pieces. Arnold stood by her side, his tall form in striking contrast to her graceful figure, and his bronzed handsome face still distinguishable in the fading twilight.

"Oh! let them be," said Hern, detecting the wandering glance of Avice. "Let them have a quiet talk together. What say you, Miss Stanmore?"

"I have no wish to interrupt them," she answered, simperingly.

"Do you know," said Hern, as they strolled along, "ever since I have seen Miss Rosamond, I've thought what a capital wife she'd make my boy, and how proud I should be of such a daughter at the Hall. If things should happen to look like falling in love together at any time," added he, "I hope that we shall be able to manage matters comfortably and without quarrelling, Miss Stanmore?"

He seemed to listen attentively for Miss Stanmore's reply, but not with that painful eagerness which Avice listened.

Miss Stanmore answered very graciously,

"If young Mr. Hern did so far honour our family as to make an offer to one of its members," she replied, "I am sure we should all be too highly favoured to dispute his claim, or to deny consent. Mr. Hern has not asked this strange question without a sufficient reason, I presume."

"Why no," said Walter bluntly; "there, I haven't! I've talked it over with the lad, and should like to talk it a little

bit over with you, Miss Stanmore. Don't go away, niece. I didn't mean it as a hint."

He held Avice's hand so close to his side with his great arm, that Avice, who had made a movement to withdraw, was checked.

"You must make one of our counsel of war, Avice," said he. We shall be very glad of your opinion, shan't we, Mum—Miss?"

Miss Stanmore, who would have preferred a *tête-à-tête* for private reasons of her own, having a vague belief in the love of other couples being a contagious disorder which spread to parties less intimately concerned, replied, "Oh! yes, to be sure," but certainly did not mean it, if looks went for anything at Olverton House.

"The truth is," began Walter, "I've every reason to believe the young pair yonder have taken a liking to each other, and I do hope that everybody will think with me, that when taste, beauty and fortune go together, opposition is da—cruel hard."

"Certainly it is," affirmed Miss Stanmore, who was inclined to agree upon every point of argument.

"For this object, I have managed to leave Rosamond with Arnold, who has been dying the last month for a chance to pop the question," said he, with a chuckle; "and I hope Miss Stanmore doesn't think I have acted wrong by no means?"

And, forgetting his grammar in the urgency of the question, he stared into the broad face of the lady on his right arm.

"Well, well, I hope—I mean, I think not," said Miss Stanmore, very much surprised, "it certainly is remarkably sudden, and though I have had a little idea how matters were going on, yet really—hem!"

And at a loss to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, she wound up by a mild cough.

Avice felt her bosom throbbing, her eyes filling with tears, her hand shaking as it rested on her uncouth uncle's arm. Had it gone so far as that already? had it all been schemed and carried out that evening, and was Rosamond at the very instant listening to ardent vows, or annihilating every hope of the bold aspirant? How fervently she prayed that Rosamond might refuse him! how truly she felt that nothing

but evil would come of the engagement which her companions were talking over, and debating upon it as if it were already settled.

"Well, what do you say to all this, niece?" asked Walter, at the end of a long speech on settlements proposed, "come, you're mum enough, girl—give tongue—give tongue!"

"I think that you have forgotten a most important point."

"What's that?" cried Hern, eagerly.

"I think that you have forgotten the respect due to Mr. Stanmore, who should have been consulted before arrangements were talked over, and the scheme laid to transfer his daughter to your son," said Avice, emphatically. "I think, Mr. Hern, you have acted ungenerously in taking advantage of his absence."

Walter Hern gave a low whistle, and replied:

"I don't see that Mr. Stanmore will have any complaints to make if a rich husband is found for his daughter, and I thought it was a better plan to get it all over before he came home to freeze us with his confounded ceremony. He's a very good fellow; but somehow I can't talk to him as I could to anybody else; he's got a look that nobody else has; it says 'shut up, old fellow, shut up!' as plain as it can speak."

"Mr. Hern is right," said Miss Stanmore, to Avice, "and although I have never observed so remarkable a look as he has just described, yet I have no doubt it does suggest that idea, and it must consequently be extremely embarrassing to a stranger. Really, Mr. Hern has acted wisely in leaving it to me, or you, or Rosamond to break the tidings to him, and—ahem!—I think when he comes home, perhaps you could do it—ahem!—in the least objectionable manner, Avice—not that I should mind—oh, no!"

"Mr. Stanmore's daughter has not yet accepted Mr. Hern," said Avice, quietly.

"Eh!" exclaimed Walter, "why good God! you don't think she won't have him, do you?"

"I cannot answer," said Avice, mournfully. "I wish I could. Oh! Miss Stanmore," turning to the prim virgin, "if you would spare much sorrow, avert much pain, from your brother, from us all, you will not advise further in this matter, you will interdict all intercourse between Mr. Hern's son and

Rosamond until Mr. Stanmore returns from London. I beg this of you as you value happiness and peace."

"Why you cannot think my brother will feel offended, Avice?" exclaimed Miss Stanmore.

"I think that he will refuse to hear one word concerning the proposed match," said Avice, warmly. "Oh! I am so sorry we have left them together—let me go to Rosamond. I must go—I must go!"

And without waiting for a reply, she drew her hand from the arm of Hern, darted from them, and was gone.

Avice ran swiftly along the winding gravel paths till she came to the lawn, on which she had left Rosamond and Arnold standing. Rosamond was gone, but Arnold Hern was still in the same spot, his arms folded on his chest, his dark eyes bent on the green sward at his feet, and the fountain gaily playing near him.

She could not see the face on which to read the confirmation of her fears, and he did not observe her as she darted by, and ran up the stone steps to the glass doors of the parlour. The room was untenanted and nearly dark. She flew up stairs to Rosamond's own boudoir, and pushing open the door with both her hands, passed into the room and looked round her.

There was a dark figure almost indistinguishable from the darkness of the coming night, heaped upon the floor by a velvet chair near the window, and from it came a stifling sound of weeping. She ran into the room and towards the figure on the ground, crouching along with it, drawing its head to her bosom, and flinging her fond arms round it.

"Oh! Rosamond, Rosamond, for the love of God say you have refused him!" cried Avice, "say anything but that he has won the affections of your heart, and stolen your love like a robber on this evil night! Oh! Rosamond, do speak—do, do say you love him not—you have not thrown yourself away on such a man as he?"

"Avvy, Avvy!" Rosamond could only sob.

"Not that Arnold Hern has won Mr. Stanmore's daughter!" said Avice, folding her passionately in her arms. "Not that he is to be the master genius of her life, controlling her every action, and crushing every impulse of her generous heart—not that she has forgotten father, home, all of us for

him, and given him her promise—say anything, but speak ! ”

“Avvy,” cried Rosamond, clinging to her friend, “have I done wrong, do you hate me now ? It was my fate—I felt that his words were true and from the heart, and I have loved him from the first night of our meeting—what could I do or say, knowing that, and he before me kneeling and imploring for a word ? ”

“And you—and you ? ” frantically asked Avice.

“I—I could but tell him in return,” said Rosamond, between deep convulsive sobs, which every instant choked her utterance, “that I—I loved him ! ”

The two young women clung together and wept, but what a bitterness of tears was there in the sorrow of Avice Hern.

“I did not think of father—of what he would say, of anything,” Rosamond went on. “I have betrayed his trust in me, and have promised my hand in secret, abusing his authority. Oh ! I am very wicked, and may God forgive me.”

“Hush ! hush ! ” said Avice, “not wicked, sister, but thoughtless ; carried away by the ardour of your nature, and deluded by—but I will spare him now ; you shall not hear another word against him—I only pray he may love my Rosamond with one hundredth part of the affection with which my Rosamond loves him. I pray that the castles in the air which will fade when this is known, castles built by your father, by me, by others in their dreams, may have been illusive ones, and that yours may live for ever, a dazzling fabric that shall never melt away.”

So Rosamond reared her idol, and Avice, her teacher—worshipping an idol too, and seeing not her castle tottering above her head, and threatening a ruin—prayed that it might ever last, and, if it was based on shifting sands, that Rosamond, blinded by her love, might still adore it, and be happy in the ignorance which was so deep a fount of bliss to her.

And Arnold Hern rode home under the starlit heaven, and felt a purer feeling at his heart than he had known in all his life—felt the alchemy of love working its miracle within him, and the real gold in his nature, the few grains amidst the dross and alloy, shining brightly at the bottom

of the crucible. He listened not to his father's congratulations, he sat on his mare looking straight before him into space, and building his castle too, in which he was to live the happiest of young fellows, with the prettiest and gentlest of wives, and in which he was to forget all his old passions, his inordinate selfishness, and his many vices, and be a good young man for ever and ever !

Ay ! for ever and ever ! but the angels looking down on the world of castle builders, cry not Amen to it—there are too many wrecks of good resolutions cast adrift on the Ocean of Life.

CHAPTER III.

SIGNS OF A STORM.

A FEW days after Arnold Hern's proposal to Rosamond, Mr. Stanmore returned to Sanderstone in no better temper than he had quitted it. It seemed as if the frown with which he had departed, had settled on his features, and resolved him into a stern-looking man, burdened with all the cares of the world.

He found fault with everything ; with the coachman for being two minutes late at the railway station, despite a hasty formal note to his sister the night before, apprising her of the time that he should arrive at Branscombe—he found fault with the roads, with two toll-men, for keeping him waiting for change, with the gardeners for the neglect of the lawn in front of the house, and with the ladies for taking the trouble to leave the parlour, and welcome him after their usual custom in the hall.

"Could you not have curbed your eagerness to receive me?" said he, sarcastically, "and moderated your joy a little, instead of letting it escape to the hall for the amusement of the menials. There—there don't smother me, I'm tired."

"You have not dined, Arthur?" asked his sister.

"Dined—no!" he answered, "and let me dine in peace, if you please. John," to a servant standing near, "not at home to anyone to-night. Everybody out, and gone Heaven

knows where. I make no exception Avice, not even to Mr. Clifton," added he, with a faint smile, the first since his return, playing for a moment on his face.

When he had dined, he relaxed from his stern humour, and began to ask questions concerning his home, the visitors who had been in his absence, the letters which had arrived and been put by for him.

"The Herns?" was almost his first question.

Rosamond bent her head over her work till the ringlets drooped before her face, and concealed the flushed cheeks.

"Yes, ahem! the Herns have been—once or twice, ahem," said Miss Stanmore; "and how is London looking, Arthur?"

"London," replied Mr. Stanmore, "oh, there is no change in London, the same wearying, bustling, driving place, every one racing to some goal, palaces, prisons, workhouses, and hospitals, all entertaining visitors—the undertaker driving as good a business as the butcher and baker. Governments going in and out, people making and breaking fortunes day after day, and old friends who had forgotten my very existence so glad to see me—were only speaking of me yesterday to Jones, Brown, or Robinson!"

After reading all his letters, and glancing at a magazine or two, which had long awaited his coming, he turned to Rosamond, and said—

"Well, Rosy, and where has your prattling tongue got to? Have you no inquiries to make of the old dad after his long journey, or has absence made the heart grow—callous?"

"No, papa! oh! no," stammered Rosamond, "but I, I—did I not speak just now? I thought I did."

And the eyes which had glanced up from the work were veiled again. Poor trembling Rosamond, with her secret too big for her little heart, what a terrible evening was that of her father's return, and what an ordeal she passed through in trying vainly to appear like the daughter whom he had left a few weeks since! What a trouble it was to remember all that was being said, and not relapse into that thought which rendered the voices of the speakers indistinct and monotonous—what a start she made at each mention of the name of Hern, how her head ached—how strange

everything was—how relieved she felt when her father had bidden them good-night, and had gone to his own room !

When the ladies were left to themselves, Miss Jane Stanmore, laying down the newspaper upon which she had been vainly endeavouring to fix her attention, crossed her hands and began—

“ I think, Avice, we had better arrange a plan to break the news in the morning before young Mr. Hern makes his offer in person to my brother—for the suddenness of the thing might—might be too much for him. There’s no saying what he might answer if he were disposed to be cross, you know.”

“ What do you suggest, Miss Stanmore ? ” asked Avice.

“ Ahem ! what do you suggest, Miss Hern ? ”

“ The best of all plans,” answered our heroine ; “ that Rosamond’s own faltering lips should tell the story, and trust all to a father’s love. There would be no fear of the result.”

“ Oh ! no, no ! ” cried Rosamond ; “ to save my life, I could not utter one word to him—I feel that his first look would kill me.”

“ Fear ! ” exclaimed Miss Stanmore, in answer to Avice’s remark. “ I’m sure so far as fear for the result is concerned, there is nothing to be alarmed at. He may be cross at being the last to hear it, but Mr. Stanmore must feel glad and proud when he learns that his daughter has received so advantageous an offer.”

Avice made no reply, save by a dubious look.

“ Oh ! you think not, Miss Hern,” said Miss Stanmore, rightly interpreting the meaning expressed on Avice’s pale face ; “ well, it is very singular that you should imagine my brother is so hard to please.”

“ For Rosamond’s sake I hope I may be mistaken,” replied Avice ; “ but I have always entertained the idea that my guardian’s esteem for Mr. Hern and his son was not very profound—but I may be doing him a great injustice.”

“ But this is not coming to an arrangement, is it ? ” petulantly cried Miss Stanmore, “ and I think we should decide—I do, indeed ! Rosamond is out of the question, of course, so I think if you and I—ahem ! ”

Avice listened with respectful attention.

"If you or I, as I have just observed, were to inform Rosamond's father to-morrow morning," continued Miss Stanmore intently surveying Avice during her remarks. "Yes, to-morrow as early as possible—it would put an end to all suspense. I should be too eager to break it to him, for I know his temper thoroughly, and could manage him; but really, I—that is, my nerves are not so strong as they were; and if he gets satirical, it always upsets my system, and puts me in a flurry, making me feel as if warm water were being poured recklessly down my back, which is a very unpleasant sensation, I can assure you, my dear Avice."

The affectionate prefix to our heroine's name was uttered in so tender and coaxing a tone, that Avice could not refrain from smiling at the old lady, as she leaned across the table, and with her head on one side cast an eager glance towards her.

"If you fear not to entrust me with the delicate revelation, and believe that I will do my best to make Rosamond's position less embarrassing," said she, "I will gladly undertake the task."

"He will hear everything from you," murmured Rosamond.

"I have no doubt that you will manage it as well as I could myself," said Miss Stanmore. "I only regret my attack of nerves has unfortunately come on to-day. He can but think it a most excellent offer—a splendid offer. Rosamond, you ought to be a happy girl!"

Rosamond smiled and blushed, and looked happy enough then, and Avice repressed a heavy sigh, and smiled likewise to keep the agitated girl in countenance. That night Rosamond came to Avice's room as in the old times, and took up her favourite position at the feet of Avice, with her head resting back, and her friend's hands clasping her neck.

Then, as in the old time also, came the outpourings of her heart—more fond and passionate now beneath the stronger emotions which possessed it, and even Avice was alarmed at the ardent affection which Arnold had aroused. Rosamond could speak of nothing but Arnold, his perfections, his talents, his love for her, and what she could undergo for his sake, if it were necessary. She told all this with swimming eyes and heaving bosom; but her very agitation was the sure

sign of the strength of her love—of her belief in the romance and in her courage to brave a thousand obstacles for the sake of Arnold Hern.

"I have a presentiment, dear Avice," concluded she, "that there is much unhappiness in store for me—that my father's pride will be aroused, and that he will seek to stand between Arnold and me with all the force of his authority."

"And if so?" anxiously inquired Avice.

Rosamond turned pale.

"If so, although I love my father more than tongue can tell, although I reverence him, Avice," she said, "I cannot barter my one hope—I cannot cease to love my Arnold. He may stay our marriage, but he cannot alter my affection or control it."

"Rosamond, I beg of you in any case not to form too high a standard of the love of Arnold Hern," pleaded Avice; "think of him as your betrothed—your future husband, if you will, but if you believe him without faults, and magnify each action into heroism, the reality will kill you."

"When I love—I love with my whole heart," replied Rosamond.

"May you never grieve with your whole heart—for it will break," thought Avice, as Rosamond, with a shower of kisses, left her to her repose.

Avice Hern's allotted task was far from a pleasant one, although she had undertaken it in the belief that Mr. Stanmore would listen to the whole of her recital, which in Miss Jane's case, and with Miss Jane's explanation was extremely doubtful. It is an unpleasant task at all times to be the bearer of news which may excite the hearer, and so the rapid beating of her heart as Avice stole down the stone steps into the garden, on the morning of the following day, was quite excusable, even for a heroine.

Mr. Stanmore was amusing himself by feeding his gold fish with some crumbs of bread. He stood there on the very spot where Arnold Hern had told his love and won his daughter from him.

He looked up as Avice advanced, but did not desist from his occupation.

"Ah! Avice," said he, "the first lady up in the house, of course. It is so beautiful a morning, that to keep to one's chamber is quite a sin. So think my friends with the arlet

fin," pointing to the gold-fish flitting rapidly in the water, and bobbing now and then at a tempting crumb with the gravest condescension, "for they've been out of bed since sunrise."

Mr. Stanmore had slept off the vapours of the preceding night—the early rising had done him good, too, and Avice congratulated herself upon finding him in a better temper than he had been for many months.

"It is a beautiful morning," said Avice, "worthy of the last summer days."

"Yes, true," said he; "for the last days of summer—days when summer dies in the brown arms of autumn, should be the best, as the best days of man should be those of his old age when the stormy passions have gone, and there's peace at the hearth." He laughed, as he added: "Quite a poetical turn, by the fire of Homer! and out of my style; eh, Avice?"

Avice was reflecting upon the best course to adopt, and did not reply. His quick eye detected the abstracted gaze of his ward.

"What is the matter, Avice?" he asked, seriously. "You seem dull. Any love-quarrel with Clifton which requires my mediation? Surely not."

"No love-quarrel, dear guardian," said Avice quickly, availing herself of the proffered opportunity, "but a love-story."

"I am not fond of them in books, and have heard but few in real life. Still yours may be interesting," he said. "Come, the argument."

"Mr. Stanmore, the story requires your serious consideration," commenced Avice. "I wish you to hear it calmly and dispassionately, as it affects you first and most of all."

The light air he had assumed, left him on the instant; a gloom began to gather on his face, and his voice wavered a moment as he said:

"Take my arm, Avice; let us walk into the orchard. I hope—I—is it concerning Rosamond, ward?"

"It is."

"One moment," said he, as he led her rapidly towards a latticed door which opened into an expansive orchard. "Let me compose myself to hear the full particulars of your relation. This is very sudden. Now!"

They were in the orchard—on the closely-cropped grass with the fruit-laden branches bending over them, and the birds darting in and out the thick foliage, and singing blithely.

"About Rosamond," he murmured; "pray proceed, Avice."

"Since your departure to London, Mr. Stanmore, Rosamond has received an offer which taken in a worldly point of view—"

"Pardon me, Avice," said Stanmore, hastily, "but when I think of my daughter, that is the last point of view from which I would fain observe her. I should not be studying her happiness if I considered with what eyes the world would look upon her. No matter for the advantageous position—that is, money or rank—who is the suitor? I feel myself prejudiced against him already."

"I hope not," answered Avice.

"The suitor, had he been a gentleman, would have studied the father's feelings more," said Stanmore, sternly, "and a man though he love, has in my opinion no right to entangle the object of his affections by a premature proposal, ere he know the father's wishes regarding her whom he seeks."

"You were away from home," said Avice, making use of the only extenuation she had to offer—a poor one she was well aware.

"Tut, tut, from home!" replied Stanmore. "Did a few weeks make much difference, or did not he wait for my—but I am unjust, perhaps. Come, Avice, the suitor's name, and for God's sake any name but one!"

"Arnold Hern."

"So—so, that man," he said, his face shadowing more and more, "I was as certain it could be no other, as I am well assured he shall never call my child his wife."

"Make no sudden resolutions, Mr. Stanmore, I implore you."

"It is no sudden one, Miss Hern," he answered; "it is a resolution formed months since—formed by my conviction of the impossibility of your uncle's son being capable of making any woman happy; and for a whim, a girl's first fancy, shall I sacrifice the lasting happiness of my only daughter? I am a better father, Avice."

"Mr. Stanmore," said Avice, "your daughter's love is no

child's fantasy, but the sole hope of her gentle life; her happiness is so bound up with your consent, that though Arnold Hern may be unworthy of her gentleness and goodness, yet to deny her to him is to kill her. Strange as the passion is for one so opposite in all respects to her, it is the deepest in her nature."

"Avice—Miss Hern, do you believe that he would make my daughter happy?" he asked, peremptorily.

"Happiness is in God's hands, Mr. Stanmore," answered Avice. "I can but believe now, that he loves Rosamond, and would do all in his power to make her happy."

"Aye! for a day, a week, a month, perhaps," he said, bitterly, "and then my daughter would die out of his memory. Avice," said he, stopping abruptly, "standing here before you, speaking dispassionately as man can speak, when thunderstruck with such intelligence, I assure you that he shall never marry Rosamond. O! I would as soon see her wither day by day, and die before my eyes, as see her happiness with him sink suddenly away, and the consuming blight of neglect kill her with a greater cruelty."

Avice, faithful to her promise, still urged the cause of Rosamond, but the more she pleaded, the darker, though he listened, gathered the clouds upon his brow.

"Miss Hern," said he, at last, in cold biting tones, such as Avice had never heard before, "you are against me—against your own good sense, against the foolish girl you plead for; I have given you the answer that I shall give to Rosamond, to Arnold Hern, to anyone who may ask the question. I am no harsh tyrant of a father, I am fulfilling that duty which I promised to perform at the death-bed of her mother—that mother who consigned to you, young as you were, a trust—which you have now abused."

"She consigned to me your daughter's happiness, Mr. Stanmore," cried Avice, turning pale, "and I am doing what my heart prompts is right. If Rosamond loved him less, if it were anyone but Rosamond, I would say keep Arnold away—the dream will fade in its own time, but though he is not worthy of her, and may not even have the courage or resolution to love her for a lifetime, I say for Rosamond's sake let him marry her, it is the lesser evil."

"No woman that loves should counsel another," said Stanmore, in the same cold manner; "the mind takes its colouring

from her own feelings, not her common-sense. Your feelings are perverted by a visionary sentimentalist, and you accuse me of being harsh and cruel. Keep to your own lover, Miss Hern, and leave Rosamond's to me."

"I have no more to say, Sir," replied Avice, withdrawing her hand from his arm.

"You are indignant?"

"No Sir—I am hurt."

"If I have in my excitement uttered words which—" began Stanmore, apologetically.

"You have uttered words which can never be forgotten, Mr. Stanmore," said Avice, turning away.

"Avice!"

But Avice had her hand upon the lattice door, and with a sad momentary glance at him, from eyes which were fast filling with tears, she opened it, passed into the garden, and left him full of his own bitter thoughts, standing beneath the trees and watching her receding form.

CHAPTER IV

CONSEQUENCES.

THE storm had settled on the house of Olverton, and small tempests of emotion were raging in every room, descending even to the servants' hall, and disturbing the domestics, who quarrelled amongst themselves over threads of subjects, which had been caught up at cracks of half-opened doors and key-holes handy to the ear.

Miss Jane and Avice had exchanged a few words upon the result of Avice's conference with Mr. Stanmore—the former lady being of opinion that it was entirely through Avice's mismanagement of the case, that so unsatisfactory a decision had been arrived at, and that had Avice listened to her entreaties, to allow her to break the news to her brother, with that characteristic gentleness for which she, Miss Stanmore, was remarkable, Mr. Stanmore would not have so preposterously declined all connection by marriage with the great family at Sanderstone. Miss Jane had even in her indignation charged point-blank at her brother as he came

in with his anxious face from the garden, but had received so fierce a volley in return, and had been called a meddling match-maker, and names more disrespectful still, that she had stumbled up stairs into her own room, and taken to a long series of hysterics, which did not help to calm the troubled waters on which so many fragile barks were tossing.

At a late hour of the morning, Arnold Hern called and desired a private interview with Mr. Stanmore. He was immediately admitted, and found the gentleman he sought alone in the usual sitting-room, wrapped closely in his dressing-gown, and standing by the window as rigid as a statue.

There was more of regret for the task he had to perform than of anger at the dissimulation practised against him visible on his face, as Stanmore turned and bowed slightly to young Hern, who entered with a familiar "good-morning."

The impression of something wrong and what that something was instantly suggested itself to Arnold, and the bright look with which he had entered slowly vanished from his face.

"I am glad to give you welcome back to Sanderstone, Mr. Stanmore," said Arnold, extending his hand.

"Thank you!" replied he, as his cold hand for a moment touched that of Arnold Hern's.

"The weather has been very fine the last week."

"Very."

They remained standing, Stanmore moody and depressed, Arnold flushed and embarrassed.

"Mr. Stanmore!" cried Arnold after a pause.

He had found courage to begin, and with a look of respect, anxiety, and fierceness strangely commingled, Arnold dashed into the subject.

"Mr. Stanmore!"

"Sir."

"Ignorant as I am of the etiquette required on an occasion like the present, I have still come with the intention of fairly stating a subject most important to us both, and entreating your kind consideration to it, praying that whatever personal dislike may bias you against me, you will waive it for this once—for ever."

Mr. Stanmore coloured. Although he had a personal dislike to the speaker—and most men with strong minds have their dislikes—he did not relish being told of it to his face with those bold unflinching eyes fixed full upon him.

“Proceed, Mr. Hern.”

“By your cold demeanour, Sir,” said Arnold, “I feel convinced some one has forestalled my disclosure and set your mind against me.”

“Continue, Sir.”

“Mr. Stanmore, I love your daughter,” cried Arnold excitedly, “I love her more than my life, my soul—more than anything on earth, or above it. Think ill of me as you may, I feel you cannot give discredit to this statement, or doubt for a single instant the intensity of the passion which consumes me. Mr. Stanmore, I have loved Rosamond from the first evening of our meeting; she controls my every thought, waking or sleeping she is ever before my eyes. And she loves me in return, she has confessed it,” he ran on wildly, “and you will not, for your daughter’s sake, crush two hearts bound to each other, or destroy by a blighting denial a love that God must have destined from the first. You cannot do this, though I were your bitterest enemy.”

The fiery vehemence of Arnold was not without its effect on Mr. Stanmore.

“Mr. Hern, I will be frank with you,” said Stanmore, in a kindly tone, “more, I will thank you for the offer and the honour intended for my daughter, but—”

“Sir, do not decide at once,” cried Arnold, “think, reflect!”

“It has been long considered, Mr. Hern,” replied Stanmore, “and there is but one answer to give, though you were heir apparent to the throne of England. May I crave your attention for an explanation of the reasons that urge me to this painful decision?”

Arnold inclined his head in assent.

“Mr. Hern, in every respect you are unsuited for my daughter,” said Stanmore. “I make the statement calmly, unprejudiced by any crude suspicions. I speak from my own general observations.”

“Why unsuited, Mr. Stanmore?” asked Arnold, whose face had assumed a less amiable expression.

“I will tell you,” replied he, “trusting the urgency of the

case will pardon the uncourteous explanation. I hope you will believe that I make it with no desire to insult you."

He paused.

"The reasons, Sir?" demanded Arnold.

"It is my opinion, Sir," said Stanmore, "that a man of your temperament—that is a man of ungovernable passions—is not capable of making a woman happy, or of loving one object for any length of time. He is a man led away by each new attraction that presents itself, a man succumbing to all temptation through a lack of self-command which is his chief characteristic—his chief bane. Sir, I believe that you love my daughter, and that the passion I have spoken of will make you feel my denial more bitterly than a man of more equable temperament might have done; but that same passion will cause your love to burn out the sooner, and leave you free to act."

"Mr. Stanmore, is a hasty temper to condemn me—to stand a bar to the great hope of my life—blasting the only perfect happiness to which I have ever looked forward?" cried he.

"Mr. Hern, one unkind word would break my daughter's heart," said the other; "one violent outburst of temper—and when love had grown stale, and the dream was over, it would come of necessity—would be the first spadeful of earth thrown up for her grave."

"Sir, you do not know my strength of mind."

"Too well."

"You have listened to the voice of slanderers."

"Not I, Sir; not I."

"Will you give me a trial—will you test my sincerity?"

"For what end?" inquired Stanmore. "I believe by a severe restraint it might be possible to act well *before* marriage; but the afterwards, when the prize is gained! no, no—I wish you well, young man, but I have only one reply."

"Is my passionate nature your only plea of excuse?" demanded Arnold, with a frown.

"It is the greatest."

"And you refuse your daughter's hand to me?"

"I must."

"Then—" he looked up with the fire of that nature Mr. Stanmore had just remonstrated against, blazing in his dark

eyes, met Mr. Stanmore's calm, serious look bent on him in return, and stopped.

"Then you will attempt to rob me of her—eh, Mr. Hern?" said Stanmore. "Do I read that glance aright?"

"Never mind—never mind!" cried Hern, opening and shutting his hands spasmodically. "My actions cannot please you whatever they may be—you have settled your plans, and with an iron hand crushed those which would have made me a better man. You seek to degrade me—to balk me by your cold, cutting authority—you who have out-lived love, and forgotten the pangs of five-and-twenty years. May I see Rosamond?"

"That would be madness, indeed."

"Then you and I stand one against the other with swords drawn, both fighting for one prize," cried Arnold. "I cannot fling aside my love as you direct, as if it was an old glove that had but to be cast away with a movement of the hand—I would not do so if I could! I go—I leave your house—you have humiliated me—it is your day to triumph now."

Brandishing an arm wildly above his head, his face contorted and nearly black with passion, he strode from the room, through the hall into the open air, and was seen by more eyes than Mr. Stanmore's, riding away from the house, furiously lashing his horse at every plunge.

"Something good might have been made of Arnold Hern at one time," thought Mr. Stanmore, as he looked after him, "but those who should have controlled his actions have sown the seeds of passions which have taken too deep a hold upon him ever to be eradicated now. Poor fellow!"

He turned away from the window, and rang the bell.

"Desire my daughter to attend me in this room," said Mr. Stanmore to the domestic who responded to the summons.

"Better one black day and all set aside, than a hundred gloomy mornings," said Mr. Stanmore, as the door closed, "this love must be a mere hallucination, a premature fancy that can be brushed away like bloom from a peach. Very romantic all this, but very unreal. 'Tis true love that takes its time to grow, developing itself leaf by leaf, slowly and surely, each fibre digging downwards and hardening to a root.—Well Rosamond?"

Rosamond entered, pale, trembling and weak. She did

not look up as she entered, but gazed direct at the carpeted floor.

"You sent for me, papa?" she asked in tones almost inaudible.

"Rosamond," said he, advancing and leading her gently by the hand to the old place by the window, "I am about to reproach you for promising a hand to one so undeserving of it, and whom I could never call my son—I will make as little comment as possible concerning this at all. You have seen Avice?"

"Yes, Sir."

"She has told you of our interview in the orchard."

"Yes."

"Then I can spare nearly all allusion to the subject," said he. "Now, dear Rosamond, I feel assured this is a foolish love tale—one of those school-girl fancies which are as catching as the measles and about as harmless in the end. God forbid that on your side it should be more serious, for he is, as I have just told him, in every way unfitting for a gentle wife. Boadicea, or Joan of Arc might have suited him—not Rosamond Stanmore, who would consider a frown at her the most cruel act of injustice in the world. Oh! Rosy, Rosy, we must get over this difficulty—we must indeed."

The faint, sickly smile with which she answered him, cut him to the quick, but he feigned not to observe it and went on.

"Will you trust me, now, Rosamond, or will you abnegate all paternal rule, and fly to the fierce stranger, who will love you for three weeks, and then slowly murder you? Will you believe that I am acting for the best?"

"Oh! dear, dear, papa—oh! dear, papa!" cried Rosamond, the tears coming at last, the heavy, choking sobs welling up from her bosom.

"Hush! hush! God bless you—this is very foolish—very childish!" he said, pressing his arm round her waist and drawing her to his side. "I am doing right—I feel I am, my dear girl, or I could not deny you even the wish to leave home and me for ever. But I will not have your heart broken—anything but that. Rosamond, we must leave England."

"Leave England!" exclaimed Rosamond, with a wild look of affright.

"Yes, it is the best remedy in the world for premature affections of the heart," said he, "change of air, diversity of scene and character, the excitement of travel, will soon restore the mind to its natural tone again. Yes, we will leave England for five or six months."

"And Avice?" asked Rosamond, forgetting her own sorrows for the moment, in her solicitude for her friend.

"Avice will go with us, of course—and I'll ask Clifton."

Rosamond answered not, and Mr. Stanmore resumed the original subject with his daughter, speaking with all gentleness, remonstrating with all kindness, but firm in his resolution not to sacrifice her to the son of Walter Hern.

Throughout the long interview, broken by tears and a wild painful emotion, which Rosamond vainly attempted to suppress, not one word did Rosamond hazard in reply for the cause of her own heart.

Perhaps she was convinced, perhaps she thought her father was right, or perhaps her impressionable nature had received an eternal image of the loved one, and her very silence told of a determination to evade all promise, and to cancel nothing that had passed.

Half an hour subsequent to this conference, Mr. Stanmore saw Avice leave the house and take the road in the direction of Sanderstone village. He snatched his hat and followed her, coming up with her a few hundred yards from his own mansion.

"Miss Hern, we parted ill friends."

"No, Sir," she answered.

"Yes, we did," he said quickly, "and I have come to beg your pardon for hasty words but uttered from the lips, for words that must have sounded very cruel on my part. Come, you will think no more of them."

What could Avice do after such an entreaty from her guardian?

"Was not your rash little head, Avice, jumping at a conclusion that would have sprung a mine in Olverton House?" asked Stanmore, "confess now, you had some project in course of formation which would have startled us?"

"I—I fancied that you had formed a false estimate of me—had begun to suspect my love for Rosamond, and so thought it was better for me to think of going away."

"Going away, my high-spirited fairy!" cried Stanmore.

"No, no Avice, something more serious than a few words must part guardian and ward."

"Will not that parting come?" inquired Avice.

"When you marry—not before."

"I hope not—but——"

"But you doubt! Why what could part us but your wedding, Avice?"

"I do not know," replied Avice; "but we all have our presentiments."

"And you have one, of course?" said he. "Well, we shall not quarrel about Rosamond any more, at least—both our opinions being formed and fixed—and opposite! You think Rosamond ought to marry Arnold Hern—I think not. You have all ladies under twenty-one on your side—all the subscribers to the libraries—all the match-makers—all the sentimental young men with turn-down collars, and long hair. I have all the steady old gentlemen, fathers of families—fond of their girls—one or two mammas who do not think a 'good match' worth the sacrifice that Rosamond would make. So you have the greater army; but I have a little phalanx of high principle actuated by sound sense, and commanded by General Forethought—a most praiseworthy officer I assure you."

"I am in the wrong then, Mr. Stanmore?"

"Oh! decidedly—and you will acknowledge your error one day. There is no fear of a lady's mind bearing always the same impression. Mark my words, you will desert to the opposite faction."

"I think not."

"But I tell you—well, we will not commence the serious quarrel that is to part us some day, so good-morning. We are very good friends now, Avice, eh?"

"Oh! yes."

"And you are not going to run away with a bandbox and Mr. Clifton?"

"No, Sir."

"Then I am easy in my mind."

He turned back and left Avice to resume her way alone. He went home in the best of tempers, humming a lively air to himself. He thought his plans had been well worked out, brought to bear with skilful arrangement, and that a few weeks would set all to rights again. *His* daughter in love

with Arnold Hern?—pooh! pooh!—a child's whim, nothing more. What people call 'first love'—a thing that never comes to anything more substantial than a few valentines, and whispered compliments—a nice partner for a polka, and so on. It was all right, he would take Rosamond a trip on the continent, and bring her back as heart-whole as ever!

So it was arranged and carried out, and in two or three days Arnold Hern was thunder-struck with the intelligence that Mr. Stanmore, his sister and daughter, Miss Hern, Mr. Clifton, and Mr. Clifton's mother (who had been persuaded at last to leave Sanderstone,) had started for the continent.

Arnold's first impulse was to follow them, but there were a thousand difficulties in the way, and his father would not move an inch from the Hall, and swore fearfully when his son talked of going in pursuit.

"They must come back," said Walter, "and the girl won't forget you. Wait your time, and nurse your grievances!"

BOOK VI.

“ I am alone.

The past is past. I see the future stretch
All dark and barren as a rainy sea ! ”

ALEXANDER SMITH.

“ Right or Wrong, there is no looking back ; the deed
is done ! ”

SIR E. BULWER LYTTON'S “ MY NOVEL.”

Book XI. Chap. XVI.

CHAPTER I.

DYING FOR LOVE

WE know not how many young ladies fall in love and get over it ; how many romantic misses of eighteen and nineteen feel their hearts charmed away from them by handsome young swains with speaking eyes and soft voices ; how many vow to accept no other hand but that dear fellow's to whom are written such plaintive letters crossed and re-crossed, and which are treasured up by the lover as tokens of priceless affection and sweet illegibility ; how many promise these things, and yet are reasoned out of them by sober mammas and papas, and lose all recollection of their early follies in change of scene, a trip to the continent, and a crowd of fresh faces. We should say their name is legion.

Yet, vexing as it undoubtedly is, Miss Rosamond Stanmore is an exception to this rule. She has really fallen in love—there is no mistake about it. There is no jesting her out of it ; there is no getting a smile from her that comes from the heart. It is particularly awkward for Mr. Stanmore and for our own tale, which should indicate a striking moral, that Rosamond is not like other young ladies, and will not forget the past—the plighted word by the fountain-side one evening in the summer time. But if the fair sex will give away their hearts too soon, will not judge for themselves, or probe the character of the favourite as they probe their next-door neighbour's, or the Misses Smith, or the retired tradesman at Wholesale Lodge, they must take the consequences and eat the bitter fruit of repentance after love has passed into marriage, and Corydon has laid aside his crook, given up his pastoral warblings, and become a Boanerges. We take a time in all things save in matters of love, and in those cases Common Sense, that counts and values every minute, bids us farwell, and Rhapsody and Rodomontade take each an arm and direct our sapient movements. How many a man secretly determines who

shall be his wife—how many a fair lady mentally fixes on her future husband, fate and her own charms permitting, in less time than he or she has taken to dress for a ball, to decide upon the last patterns of a vest, or the newest fashion in the way of flounce. Strange that the greatest venture of life has often the least consideration !

Avice Hern in the grand hotel at Florence, thinks to this effect, and sighs for Rosamond, taking no application to her own case, thinking that she has judged wisely and well, and wishing all young men in the world were like Edward Clifton, to make earth and woman's heart happy.

Edward Clifton believes at times that he has brought himself to love Avice, and there is no mark of discontent on his brow unless he sees Rosamond too much, or speaks with her too often. He and Avice, betrothed lovers, wander about the gay city and its environs, both quick in observation, neither requiring explanation of surrounding objects, both learned and full of book knowledge. It is all very well, this similitude of mind, but it strikes them both, and more especially Clifton, how pleasant it would be to tell of this story for the first time, to point out this and that to the charmed listener, to recite legends of the place, and all that poets have written about it, to talk of Dante and his glorious contemporaries, instead of the eternal "I remember—I know !"

A similarity of pursuit, study, mind, is not quite right ! and dissimilarity—Arnold and Rosamond—far from right also. What is right, Mr. Stanmore of Olverton House ?

Rosamond is very patient and uncomplaining. She goes with her father to all the gay places, assents to every proposed expedition, but all with that lack-lustre look, that white face to which no excitement brings a flush, that listless attitude and thoughtful gaze as fully developed in the crowd as in her quiet room looking on the Arno.

On Mr. Stanmore's face there begins to settle an expression almost akin to despair. He thinks it something more than a school-girl fancy now. But still time *must* work a change—time that destroys cities, levels thrones, makes friends of enemies and enemies of friends, parts so many lovers unsuited to each other every day, will surely work its magic on his daughter's heart. Patience !—only time and patience !

But time goes on, patience wears out, and Rosamond grows weak. There is no denying that. All the changes, all the rapid travelling, the grand scenery of nature, the journeys from one great capital to another, appear but to aggravate the disease, and rest in Florence threatens rest for ever.

"Does Rosamond ever speak of young Hern?" asks Stanmore, one morning of Avice.

"Very seldom."

"Has she forgotten him?"

Avice shakes her head.

"How strange! how like a maudlin novel, and how different from real life!" he cries, peevishly. "Avice!"

"Yes, Sir."

"Do you think my sister is her *confidante*, and is helping to fan the flames which I am doing my best to smother?" he asks. "I have caught them conferring together more than once; and my suspicions are aroused."

Avice has been no witness to a conference.

"No matter," says Stanmore as he leaves her, "we will stay in Florence years if it be required, and keep your cousin Arnold at a respectful distance."

But Mr. Stanmore is not so decisive when Rosamond grows more weak, and is wholly confined to her room one fortnight, and has the best physicians the city can procure.

"Miss Stanmore is in a bad state of health, Sir," remarks Dr. L., an English physician, long resident in Florence. "I can advise but one remedy."

"And that?" asks the father.

"Her native air."

"No other remedy?" inquires Stanmore, anxiously.

Dr. L. shakes his head.

"Ah! we must see about it."

Day after day the same injunctions, the same advice, Stanmore still replying that he will see about it, and Rosamond still getting weaker. One day Mr. Stanmore comes from a short interview with his daughter, and finds his sister and Avice in company with Mrs. Clifton.

"For home—for home!" he cries. "Better Sanderstone than Florence, with its eternal round of pleasure, and its ugly un-English faces at every corner of the street. For home, Jane--Avice!"

"How glad I shall be to get back to the Shrubby," says Mrs. Clifton, with a sigh of relief. "I did not like to hurt your feelings by mentioning it before, Mr. Stanmore, but if I ever hated anything in my life, it's foreign parts."

"Oh they are awful places," assents Miss Jane, "and when are we going?"

"To-morrow—to-day, when you like; but home for God's sake!" he cries excitedly.

The eager desire to return home exceeds all other wishes, and checks all motive that has actuated so long a stay in Florence; a terrible conviction oppresses him that if he delay, his daughter will die there, and he urges every means to expedite their departure.

"For home—England, anywhere but Florence."

The colour comes back to Rosamond's cheek at the notice of return, and there is a light in her blue eyes, that has been long absent from their beauty. She can breathe freer now, she is going to Sanderstone—to home!

They are soon up on their journey, money lavishly bestowed adds wings to speed, the post-horses are ready, the trains waiting, and they rattle onwards till they come to the great sea, and the white cliffs of Albion, and then a few weeks after Christmas-time they are at Olverton House once more, and Rosamond is better. They settle down to the old regular life, Clifton comes every evening, or rides out with Mr. Stanmore and the ladies every morning, and the Herns keep their state at the Hall, and hold aloof from the man who has spurned their proffered alliance.

In one of those country rides alluded to, Arnold Hern is seen galloping towards them. He is alone, advancing swiftly, and there is no evading him. Poor Rosamond looks down and blushes, turns pale, blushes again, and can scarcely retain the reins in her small gloved hands. Arnold comes up with them, raises his hat to Rosamond, replaces it, and after a stern glance at the rest of the group, rides past and is soon hastening away.

"Handsome enough," says Stanmore, to Avice, "and had it been any but Rosamond or you I should not have wondered at the folly."

Clifton rides by the side of Rosamond, who trembles still, and makes answer in an incoherent manner to all the subjects of his conversation.

She reins in her horse at last, and with a white face implores them to return home—she feels so faint and ill. The day is too cold for her, she thinks, but please to return, she can hardly keep her saddle.

Mr. Stanmore with a look of pain and anxiety leaves Avice for his daughter's side, and Clifton, like a true cavalier, returns to our heroine.

"Miss Rosamond is unwell," says Clifton, gloomily, "a slight thing effects Miss Stanmore now."

"She is not strong," replies Avice.

"Strong!" echoes Clifton, "a child might control her. Weak in everything but in her passion for the man who—"

He stops abruptly as he encounters a steady look from a pair of brilliant eyes.

"I beg pardon," he says, "I have no right to comment upon Miss Rosamond's actions—certainly not."

"Certainly not, Edward," Avice answers; "yet how strange!"

"What is strange?"

Avice makes no reply, and is thoughtful all the way home, and all that long day which ensues, when Clifton has departed, and Rosamond has to lie on the sofa by the fire, in a dreamy apathy, and Mr. Stanmore has gone up to his study and bolted himself in.

In the afternoon, when Miss Jane Stanmore has crept to her room for a little doze, and Avice sits watching Rosamond, who has fallen into a light slumber on the couch, a servant enters to say—

"A young woman wishes to see Miss Hern."

Avice raises her hand to check the loud voice of the domestic, and whispers, "I will come to her."

But Rosamond has been awakened by the servant's entrance, and says,

"Don't go, Avvy dear, let her come in."

"I am afraid that it will disturb you, sister."

"Oh! no, no."

"Who is it?" inquires Avice.

"It's Millthorn's daughter, Miss."

"Oh! admit her."

Katie Millthorn is shown into the room. Katie has recovered from that long indisposition which confined her

to her chair, at the "Black Hollow," and is a tall handsome girl with roses blooming on her cheeks, but with the unsettled look about the eyes still painfully apparent.

"Ah! Katie," cries Avice, "I am glad to see you well again."

"Thought you had forgotten me, Miss," says Katie, kissing affectionately the hand extended to her, "and so came to pay my respects after your long journey. Hope you have enjoyed the outlandish places, Miss, God bless you!"

"Yes, thank you," replies Avice, with a smile.

"Is that Mr. Stanmore's daughter?" asks Katie, in a whisper.

"Yes, it is his daughter," answers Rosamond, from the couch, "you and I have changed places, Katie."

"It seems so, lady," says Katie, with a wistful glance, "hope it's not love, Miss. I have heard that's a hard complaint for people to bear who have nothing else to do."

Rosamond colours, and Avice hastens to change the conversation.

"Will you be seated, Katie?"

"No, I thank you, Miss Hern," replies Katie. "I have called but to see your angel face and to go. Sometimes I wish that we were all in poverty once more, and father poaching and the lot starving, for you would come to see us then, and comfort us."

"But it is better to be free from distress, and require no comforting, Katie," says Avice.

"Perhaps it is."

"Your father is well?"

"Hearty, Miss, hearty, thank God! and young Mr. Hern—"

Rosamond colours again, and her eyes are fixed on the red fire.

"Father has a braw place, Miss Avice, and young Mr. Hern is very kind to all of us—he has a free heart as well as a handsome face, ladies—you know the young squire of course?"

"Yes," says Avice, softly.

"Oh! he's a kind man," says Katie, moving on, "kinder to us than to some of the others, perhaps, for," with a sly

glance, "he do go on at times, that he do. He has a fine mad temper—"devil's blood," my father calls it, with your pardon, ladies—but he only wants humouring."

It is with some difficulty Avice brings the conversation round to a topic less embarrassing to Rosamond, and from that Katie will occasionally diverge to say "how dull and low-spirited Mr. Arnold is now, and how cross with everything." Katie begins to draw her bright-red cloak tightly round her form, preparatory to departure, and says :

"Well, I must be going, Miss Hern. I thank God I have seen you well, and looking good. May I kiss Miss Stanmore's hand, and wish her better?"

Rosamond answers for Avice, and Katie reverentially advances, and drops on her knee before the sick girl. Avice stands and watches Katie, on whose form and that of her to whom she kneels, flickers the firelight. Rosamond is trembling very much, and Avice says :

"Come away, Katie, Miss Stanmore is too much agitated. This way, I will show you to the door."

Katie follows Avice to the door, expressing many wishes for Rosamond's speedy recovery, long after Rosamond is out of hearing of them.

When they are together in the hall, Avice's manner changes, and the look she bestows upon the cottage girl startles the blood from her cheeks; it is the old steady penetrating look of the morning wherein Clifton was its object, but more developed in this instance.

"Katie," says Avice, mournfully, "I had hoped that you would have requited me better for past services than by so mean an action as this day's. I had trusted to your nature, and thought that it would not have ungenerously deceived me, or have prompted so poor a piece of cunning in reward. Go, Katie Millthorn—may we never see each other again! You may have done more evil by coming to this house to-day, than a whole life's atonement on your part can rectify."

Katie stands with her large hazel eyes bent beseechingly on Avice, her colour changing, her hands clasped. As Avice concludes, she sinks slowly, silently on her knees before her, and crouching a suppliant on the marble pavement, cries and sobs bitterly.

"Do rise and go!" says Avice. "Not a word—I do not wish to hear one word."

"Oh! do hear me, do hear me!" implores Katie, "not my fault, but my father's and his! He came and begged me to come here and give the note; he said he loved her so—that he was dying for her—that he had favoured us so much, and we should not forget him when he asked us for a return. I did come to see your face, to hear your voice, as I call God to witness kneeling here; but he urged me to try to give Miss Stanmore—his lady-love—a note, and what could I do, what could I do—but do it? Oh! forgive me, Miss—my best friend—the only stranger who has ever loved me—say anything, but that you never wish to see me more!"

The grief of the girl is so unaffected, so powerful in its abandonment and intensity, that Avice can but reply,

"Well! I retract my word, Katie; but it was very wrong and cruel, though you are only the poor dupe. There, go, Katie, we are friends for this time; but if you ever seek again to bring discord to a home by seconding the machinations of your father's master, or following his counsel in anything relating to Miss Stanmore, there is no more forgiveness from me."

"May I die before I wound your feelings," cries Katie, snatching her hand, and covering it with kisses. "May they kill me first! I thought they were sweethearts, and Mr. Stanmore was a hard man—I did not think it was wrong. Oh! right and wrong—how it bothers my poor head!"

"It has bothered stronger heads than yours Katie," replies Avice, "there, leave go my hand, you silly girl, and do not forget the promise you have made me."

Katie goes home, and Avice returns to the parlour. Rosamond is sitting at the end of the sofa close by the fire, her hands clasped together, her eyes full of tears, her bosom wildly heaving. There is a bright blaze amongst the coals which dies out suddenly, as Avice enters.

Avice points to the fire and says:

"I will not wound you further by allusion to it, Rosy dear—I did not intend to say one word concerning it. He has fallen lower in my estimation, and in yours, God grant! by so paltry a trick, the evidence of which has vanished in

the flames before us. May your love die out as speedily and you be happy."

"Happy, Avice—Oh ! never, never that !"

"There, take your old place on the couch, and think no more about it, sister," says Avice, kindly. "I do not wish to know a word concerning the letter, or its contents, believe me."

Avice tenderly assists Rosamond to resume her recumbent position, thinking of Rosamond's mother, and her failing strength, and how like Rosamond is to her, lying there.

Rosamond speaks not again, and Avice holding her burning hand, sits by her side, and both look at the fire, in which the missive of Arnold Hern has shrivelled into nothingness. Both silently watch where it has been, thinking of what it said, or of what hopes have faded with it in the blaze, and Miss Jane Stanmore coming softly in an hour afterwards, finds them in the same position, hand in hand, and still looking at the fire.



CHAPTER II.

"THE SKELETON CLOSET" OF EDWARD CLIFTON, ESQ.

ERE it was spring-time, Rosamond was better. Whether the crisis had passed, or the English climate had helped to restore her, or there was anything in the letter that withered in the fire to work some change in her physical condition, certain it was that she grew stronger, and seemed less despondent.

To Avice, she made no allusion to the missive brought clandestinely by Katie Millthorn, and our heroine hoped and believed that it had betrayed the true nature of Arnold Hern, and helped to rob the idol of all the adornments a glowing mind prompted by its new-born love had wrapped around it.

Avice, as Mr. Stanmore had prophesied, began to reason and to think how much better it was Rosamond had never been engaged to Arnold, now the flame upon the altar was burning out of its own free will. She had never desired the engagement, but only considered it, as she had told her

guardian on the day they had had a quarrel together, a lesser evil of the two.

"Rosamond cannot surrender her love—she will obey her father and die," Avice used to think, "and though she has chosen unworthily, her affections once formed, are fixed for ever, as should be the affections of all true women."

And Avice, believing in the strength of her own heart, and what she could endure for Edward Clifton, had reasoned upon similar grounds in the case of Rosamond, and had not been convinced till Katie Millthorn came to Olverton House.

"It is better sometimes to forget love than to foster it," was Avice's second thought, "and Rosamond is quite a heroine. But to me, it seems that the parting from the first love must be the blight of a life."

Romantic little Avice, dreaming not of the shadows that were coming, and how the sun of her love would be lost in the night!

Edward Clifton was all that was good and attentive after the return from the continent, and consented to the postponement of the marriage until Rosamond was quite well, with evident reluctance.

Avice was very happy, although, once or twice—for a reason unaccountable to her—she felt a jealous sensitiveness about trifles, which she hid carefully from him, lest he should think her weak-minded and childish. Though she loved Rosamond, next to Edward, above all friends in the world, and Rosamond and Clifton had been her companions from childhood, yet she had felt her heart sink once or twice lately, he had looked at her "sister" so long, or had fallen into such deep reveries, from which even her voice failed to arouse him at the first summons.

But a smile would waft away these gossamer troubles, and leave the blue heaven shining on her.

The Herns and Stanmores were almost Montagues and Capulets; Arnold only wanted Rosamond to play Juliet, and he would have made a capital Romeo for a day or two. Of her uncle Walter, Avice saw nothing. He was living in princely magnificence at the Hall, and there were a hundred reports about his inexhaustible wealth, and the lavish hand with which he scattered his gold. Every night had its feasting and revelry with the gentry of Sanderstone, even the two real baronets came in time for cards, and got through a good

deal of money in a very little time. There was fair hunting too, and Walter or Arnold was always head of the chase ; and, oh ! the boisterous evenings when the brush was brought home, the bottle began to circulate, and the guests one by one to drop amongst the dead men, leaving the father and son—practised fellows at wine bibbing—still with steady hands.

At such feasts as these, Arnold forgot Rosamond, snapped his fingers in the air and said, "that for her ! and that," bringing his clenched fist down upon the table with a thundering noise, "for her father, and be damned to him !" and Walter Hern, in these confidential moments, would address himself to those drowsy guests who had survived their third bottle, and commence moaning out his injuries, "how scurvily Stanmore had treated him—the richest man in Sanderstone too, and heir to a king of nabobs, gentlemen—and how," interlarding his complaints with a great variety of oaths, "he had suffered the man's tantrums, and his old cat of a sister's fondlings, all for his boy—his dear—hic—dear boy !"

So if Richard Hern, a miser and a grinder of men's souls, had toiled hard and died for a fortune, his worthy brother was doing his best to get rid of it, or else Richard Hern had bequeathed to his next of kin Aladdin's lamp with all the mechanical effects. Arnold, no more thoughtful than his father, played at the same game, and with a passionate recklessness completely out-Heroded him, and made mad ducks and drakes of his sovereigns at card-tables and race-courses, even to the astonishment of his father, who had more than once broken stones on the king's highway for a shilling a-day, willing to earn an honest penny for his living, and to work hard for a crust of bread and plenty of gin ; and had, perhaps, done a little business of a different sort on the same thoroughfare in dark seasons of the year.

Walter Hern had probably forgotten his niece, for she only heard of him by rumour, although that was quite sufficient for Avice, whose good graces he had never won upon to a very great extent.

Winter was fast departing. There were signs of the spring on the black branches of the trees, and in the twisted thorny hedgerows, on rugged cliffs, and smooth, green, meadow land, when Avice went one afternoon to drink tea with Mrs. Clifton.

Mrs. Clifton, save when she had company, kept to old-fashioned rules, and had dinner at one, and tea at five, in imitation of her ancestors who had flourished in their time beneath the roof trees of the "Shrubbery." Mrs. Clifton seemed always pleased to see Avice, and called her my "child," and entreated her to cheer her widowed hearth so often, that a week seldom passed without a trip to her Edward's home, and a walk back again after tea in the gloaming—a walk worth all the carriages in the world, with that Edward of her heart as escort.

Sometimes—for Avice never decided on a certain day—Edward Clifton was absent, and on those occasions she started for home an hour earlier, and got there before the great lamp was lit in the hall of Olverton House, and thus it happened on the day we mention, in particular—a black letter day for Avice Hern in her calendar of recollections—that her affianced had gone on business for his mother to the next town, and Mrs. Clifton was, with the exception of the servants, the only inmate of the Shrubbery.

There was many a merry jest over the occurrence when Avice had taken her bonnet off, and was smoothing the plain bands of her glossy black hair, and Mrs. Clifton, who was in a facetious mood, feigned to detect signs of bitter disappointment on the blushing face of Avice Hern, who with the most musical laugh in the world, replied, "she was not disappointed in the least—she had come to see Mrs. Clifton, and not her son—oh, dear no!—and there were times," she added, "when the rougher sex only spoiled pleasant ladies' chat with their awkward comments—times when their minds were as unbending as their backs, and they could not condescend to listen to what Mrs. So-and-so said, or to hear what a fine baby Mrs. So-and-so's infant had grown.

They had tea by the firelight, and a long gossip about village affairs, Avice's pensioners, and Mrs. Clifton's visits to the poor—which were, rumour asserted, not generally acceptable, there being too fine a lady air about her Christian missions.

Avice began to think about returning.

"Oh! nonsense," said Mrs. Clifton, "I'm quite alone this evening, and you must keep me company, my dear Avice. Mr. Stanmore will send the carriage if you are not home before dark."

"But why should I give my guardian that trouble," replied Avice, "unless you—"

"To be sure I do," interrupted the brisk lady. "There, leave it all to Mr. Stanmore, he will not forget you. Do you know, my dear Avice, if I were Edward," with a merry laugh, "I should be jealous of Mr. Stanmore."

Avice joined in the laugh against herself—there was something irresistibly ridiculous in Edward being jealous of her guardian.

"Yes, you must stop," said Mrs. Clifton, "and I have another inducement to hold out, which even my strong minded Avice cannot withstand."

Mrs. Clifton smiled, and nodded her head mysteriously.

Avice waited for an explanation.

"My dear boy was in so great a hurry to depart this morning, that he left his keys in the study door," said Mrs. Clifton, rubbing her fat white hands together in high glee. "Think of seeing his study, Avice, his books, his poems—finding out all his secrets—what a temptation for a betrothed!"

"Does Edward always keep his study locked?" asked Avice, gravely.

"Oh! he is as jealous as Blue Beard about it," replied the mother; "and now the patent lock he took so much trouble to have placed on the door is fitted with the key! You see these cunning gentlemen sometimes overreach themselves, Avice."

"I do not think that it would be right to intrude upon his hermitage," said Avice, "to pry with our jealous eyes into his manuscript writings, or to seek to know the secrets of his hours of study. Oh! no," added Avice, "indeed I could not go."

Mrs. Clifton, whether conscious or unconscious of the sword of Damocles hanging by the hair in that guarded chamber, laughed at her scruples and exclaimed—

"What, his wife that is to be! Is he to have secrets from you, Avice?"

"He tells me that he has none."

"Then how can he feel offended!"

"I do not believe that he would feel offended!" said Avice, musingly. "I am sure that if I had my study, my room of books and papers, I should be proud of Edward

taking an interest in its contents, and making his own notes on the subject of my reveries."

"To be sure!" said Mrs. Clifton; "and so would he. Do you know, I fancy he must have left his study door purposely unlocked—the vain young man. He wanted his poems read by a certain pair of bright eyes, and was too bashful an author to devise other means of placing his effusions before his Avice. Ah! that's the riddle—there cannot be a doubt about it."

Avice thought it might be so—but still she hesitated.

"Come, my daughter, come!" said Mrs. Clifton, persuasively passing an arm round Avice, "I am sure that it will please you, and I know there is nothing Edward would wish to keep sealed from his future wife. It's only the inquisitiveness of servants he is guarded against, nothing more than that. Why I often go in myself to put the room to rights, or he would be buried in dust and litters. I have read his poetry too sometimes—it's very clever."

Mrs. Clifton was quite correct, Edward did not offer any objection to his mother's presence in the study, for he was there himself and could keep a strict eye on her wanderings, and dart malignant glances at the dainty white cloth with which she brushed right and left, and scattered his manuscripts. If he were in a good temper, proud of himself, and elated with his last composition, he would venture to make his mother his audience, and read aloud an effusion from his pen, she standing in the middle of the room with her clean duster folded to her bosom, and the tears of motherly pride swimming in her eyes. There was no glowing criticism too good for those poems. They were high flown, and thoughtful, and deep; he was very clever—he was the centre of the poetical system, and Byron, Scott, and Moore, but satellites revolving round him—what a great man he might be if he only gave his mind to it!

And what greater temptation could there have been offered to Avice Hern than her lover's thoughts, her own Edward's poetry—the study door unlocked—the mother for a guide! Had not the mother been initiated into the Eleusinia—then why not Avice?

Ah! why? So they went up stairs to the study of Edward Clifton, and Avice Hern, heroine of this book though she be, proved her claim to a share of the great legacy left

by her mother Eve, and went like Fatima to the blue chamber, with all Fatima's curiosity. Pardon her, gentle reader, for her woman's fault—there is a penalty for trespassing on forbidden ground, and hers, poor girl, will be a heavy one, and if she is not forgiven, let the young lady who has had the opportunity to learn all her lover's secrets, and not availed herself of it, cast the first stone!

Oh! Wildflower—Wildflower! thou hadst much better have remained a heroine full of all noble, self-denying actions, worthy of chronicling in this volume, octavo; thou hadst better have gone home alone on the dark country road, than have waited for the carriage, and the company of thine own cruel thoughts—better a dream wherein thine ignorance was bliss, than a waking wherein thy knowledge was despair!

They stood in the study—the mother and Avice, and there was light enough from the long window to guide them to the secrets of the student, after Mrs. Clifton had drawn up the Venetian blind, and let the grey glimmer of the fading day cast its ghastly reflection on them. Avice was soon absorbed in the books, carefully perusing the marginal notes written by Edward's own hand—tremblingly taking up a page or two of manuscript, and reading the closely written lines with reverence. She stood by the window poring over the records, wondering why Edward had said so little about them—there were such evident proofs of real talent sparkling throughout—talent so far above the amateur's. After a while she laid them aside to talk to Mrs. Clifton, and discovered, to her surprise, that that lady had softly stolen from the room.

What a long survey of the study she took then, as she gazed around her—she felt she loved her clever Edward more than ever on that evening—that she understood him better, and was more fond of him, and of the prize she had gained in the lottery of life. Oh! what a happy girl she was!—did she ever dream of her years gliding so smoothly, or of her timid blushing hopes being fulfilled to the letter of her desire in the far off days when she was a poor little child, and went to school at Miss Wrickerton's in a muddy back street? She could have knelt down in that silent chamber, and thanked God for so much mercy—every minute

alone was a boon above price. It was sweet to stand in that room consecrated to *him* and his thoughts, and to draw her picture of the future—of Clifton in that capacious chair by the table—Clifton with a name won amongst men—a great author perhaps!—to picture him sitting there and she leaning over him silently and reverently, watching the progress of the pen as it moved to the spirit of mind.

There was a large book with brass clasps upon the desk, a strongly bound book which she had overlooked until that moment. Should she peep in? Would he object?—he whose thoughts were all her own!

"MY DIARY!"

Oh! how could she hesitate now? His diary! wherein she would read of herself, of what the silly fellow had written in the fervour of love, in those glowing moments after he had come home from Olverton House, full of romance and his Avicé. "Did he remember everything as she remembered it in her heart—of the conversations so idle to others, so dear to themselves?" she thought as she stole softly across the room, fearful of waking its echoes.

Her hand was on the book, she deliberated and looked towards the window, and at the sky beyond it, dark enough now for the glitter of the stars.

"It's growing very dark," she murmured, "and wicked little spy that I am, I shall be justly served if I cannot read a line."

She turned the leaves over carelessly, then earnestly, searching for one date—the first bright spot in her womanhood, when he struck the chords of her deepest feelings, and woke up a harmony.

The ink was very dark, the paper white and gleaming, and every letter seemed starting into life.

Oh! Avicé Hern, didst thou dream it was the great Book of Fate, whose Sybilline leaves rustled at the touch of thy light hand?

Unconsciously she sang softly to herself as she looked for that one date, unheeding the strange confessions on each page she passed over.

She paused—there was a bright smile—the last sunny smile for many a long day, as the page was found, and the sought for date discovered.

"JULY 7TH, 18——!"

* * * * *

"Good gracious! why Avice, my dear daughter, what is the matter? Avice—Avice, don't you hear me!"

But the despairing figure of the young woman made no sign. Her arms were stretched out, the white hands were drooping nervelessly over the desk, and the face was buried amongst the leaves of that grisly volume—the wild heap of black hair was flowing over arms and hands and face—it was a shadow in that room of shadows of a deep humiliation.

"I'll get a light," cried Mrs. Clifton; "dear me, how exceedingly foolish to come up again in the dark! Here, Jane, Mary, Ellen," calling over the banisters, "a light if you please—a light!"

When she turned round once more, Avice was by her side, and gazing at her so vacantly, that the frightened lady felt the blood freezing in her veins.

"What's the matter, Avice dear?" she faltered out.

"Nothing—nothing," replied Avice, in a husky whisper. "What is there to be the matter with me? I feel a headache," she said, sweeping her hand over her cold forehead, and pushing back a lock or two of her rich disordered hair. "I—I think that I must have been asleep."

One of the servants made her appearance with a light, but Avice was already on the landing, and had closed the study door.

"Have you had a fright, my dear child?" asked Mrs. Clifton, solicitously, perhaps a little too solicitously; "it was very silly of me to leave you in that gloomy room, but I thought, I don't know why now—that you would not miss me for a moment or two. I was very foolish to go away, and you—oh! dear, dear me," she cried, now really alarmed, "how very white and strange you look, my love, to be sure!"

"Let us go down stairs," cried Avice, as she cast a shuddering glance over her shoulder, at the door of the room they had quitted. "Oh! do let us go down—anywhere, anywhere away from here!"

She hurried down stairs followed by the nervous Mrs. Clifton, whilst the startled maid with the lighted candle stole back to her fellow servants with the appalling news of Miss Hern having seen a ghost in Mr. Clifton's study.

And what a ghost it was that had sprung from the book, and laid its icy hands on the warm heart of the maiden, when the clasps—like the seal of Solomon on the Genii's chest, had been unfastened, and there were no more secrets to be learned.

The lady and guest were in the drawing-room; there was a bright lamp on the round table in the centre of the room, and Mrs. Clifton sat with the light full on her face, waiting patiently for an explanation from Avice.

There was a hoop of tiny diamonds on one finger of Avice, and it sparkled mockingly from the hands before the face. It was a gift of Clifton's—the first ring and the last!

Mrs. Clifton fidgeted and coloured, and at last ejaculated:—

"Well, my dear?"

"Has the carriage come?" asked Avice, dropping her hands, and staring eagerly at the lady.

"Not yet, Avice, oh! no—not yet," she replied. "Mr. Stanmore never sends till an hour after dark, you know."

"Ah! true."

"But, my dear good girl," entreated the lady, "what is the matter? What does it all mean? Your manner has nearly frightened me to death. I declare I can hardly draw a breath, now."

The same weary vacant look settled on Avice's features as she answered—

"I do not know—I cannot tell this moment—another time, to-morrow, to-morrow."

"But ——"

"Oh! let me go home," she said, in a low wailing tone. "Oh! do let me go home, dear Madam. I shall die if you keep me here. I *must* go home."

She started up from the chair, in which she had sunk helplessly on entering the room, and moved towards the door. Mrs. Clifton hastened to intercept her.

"I shall be quite well to-morrow, Mrs. Clifton," said Avice, assuming her own quiet voice as if by magic, "but you must let me go home now, I feel very ill—I have a dreadful headache."

"Certainly you shall go, my dear," assented Mrs. Clifton, ringing the bell, "but what can I give you?—a glass of wine, a ———,"

"Nothing—nothing!"

"Very well, but—Jones, Miss Hern's bonnet and shawl from my room, and mine and ———"

"Yours!" cried Avice, abruptly.

"I would not let you go alone for the whole world," replied Mrs. Clifton, in her most emphatic manner, "and Jane, tell the coachman to put the horses in the brougham directly; do you hear?"

Avice made no further remonstrance, she had not the power. She sank into the chair by the door again, and once more the hands were instinctively raised to cover her pallid face.

Mrs. Clifton spoke no more; there was a shade as of some deep contrition on her anxious countenance, and she inwardly prayed for Edward's return, for the servant with Avice's things, for the grating of the carriage wheels outside, anything but that awful silence, and that figure of despair sitting by the door.

They were both in the carriage at last, and rattling towards Olverton House. The journey did not take more than ten or fifteen minutes, but it was a long age to both the women, neither of whom spoke a word. Once Mrs. Clifton thought Avice had fallen asleep, she lay back so still and calm, and at another time a terrible feeling of dread lest she had died by her side took possession of her, and it required all her nerve in the latter case to put forth a hand and touch Avice, and find by the wild start that it was a living form by which she was sitting.

They were at Olverton House. The servant was letting down the carriage steps, the hall door was open, and a flood of light from its glaring lamp was streaming into the black night. As Avice came tottering into the hall, Mr. Stanmore with some papers in his hand—the old story of "The State,"—came from a side door, and stopped in the act of passing to the carpeted stairs.

"Good God! what's all this?" he cried, turning as pale as Avice, whose looks implored no questioning, "is she hurt? has there been an accident—will you please to speak, Mrs. Clifton, and put an end to this suspense?"

"I don't know what it is—I don't know what it is!" cried Mrs. Clifton, wringing her hands in her perplexity. "I did not think that—no, I don't know—how should I?"

"Avice?" cried Stanmore, turning to his ward.

"Oh! dear Sir, it is nothing," faltered Avice, "a faintness, a heavy kind of stupor which is going away, now, thank you. I shall be better when I am in my room—I think I will go at once to bed and have a good long sleep. Tell Mary to follow me with a light some one, please. You are all so needlessly alarmed, it makes me laugh—yes, I will go to bed; good-night, Mrs. Stanmore, good-night, Mr.—Mr. Clifton, I shall be quite well to-morrow, I shall indeed."

She hurried up the stairs, leaving Stanmore and the lady staring at each other—she flew into her own room, closed and double-locked the door, and then crouching in her old attitude by the bed-side—but oh! with what different feelings to that night in which the robber stole her heart—she gave way at last, and sobbed as if that heart would break.



CHAPTER III.

A PARTING INTERVIEW.

EDWARD CLIFTON did not return to the Shrubbbery till a late hour of the night; and after a few observations to his mother, who was pale and taciturn, he went direct to his room. As he passed the study door, the key and its dangling bunch appended struck his notice; and with an angry exclamation against his own stupidity and forgetfulness, he locked the door, and ascended another flight of stairs.

He had a happy dream that night, all about Avice and Rosamond—how the former loved him, and the latter loved another; and how he loved Avice now—in his dreams! He

woke up quite refreshed ; his vision had ended happily, too ! He had been married to Avice, and they had settled peacefully down at one fire-side. He had forgotten his first love, and she had wedded hers.

With what a pang do we sometimes wake from our dreams—from the pleasant party where the old loves are all there, from the bright faces that have been long lost to us, that are afar off beyond seas, that are hidden by the green moss and grave stone ; from the pressure of hands which have long crumbled to dust ; from the past as it might have been ; from the future as it never will be !

But as Edward Clifton did not go into his study when he came home on the preceding evening, so had he very pleasant dreams, and there was no pang when the dreams ended, and the daylight brightened his chamber.

Clifton was soon up and dressed. He intended to have a stroll in the garden before breakfast ; but he went no further than the study-door, at which he halted, drew out his keys, turned the lock, and entered.

A minute afterwards he might have been taken for a statue, as he stood before his desk, he was so erect and motionless, and his face so marble-like and white.

There was the blind drawn up, and he had drawn it down. More—there was the diary he had closed and clasped, open at the date of July 7th, 18— ! The leaves were rudely crumpled and dog's eared as though rude hands had clutched them, or a heavy weight had fallen on them heedlessly and marred the smooth surface of the manuscript.

He guessed it all—he read the scene aright, picturing the prostrate form of last night crushed by the words that he had written in a fool's excitement, and convinced of the hypocrisy with which he had confessed his love and followed up his conquest.

Slowly a hand extended towards the desk, and closed the diary, and with shaking fingers secured the brass clasps that held its secrets together ; then he walked to the window, drew the blind down which let in the accusing sun, retraced his steps, and sank into his chair, cowering with very shame.

When the servant came to announce breakfast, he rose and moodily descended to the breakfast parlour, locking the

stable door—we beg pardon, study door—from which the steed of Cupid had galloped away for ever.

His mother—more like a duchess than when she stood in the hall of Olverton House, piteously wringing her hands—sat at the table superintending the early meal with a face almost as shining and bright as the silver coffee-pot in which it was reflected.

“Good-morning, Edward!” said she, “what a beautiful day.”

“Yes,” he answered, languidly, as he stooped over her, and tendered her his customary morning salutation.

Mrs. Clifton was a trifle embarrassed; but she passed it off with a smirk air of composure, as Edward Clifton drew a chair to the table and began slowly stirring his coffee and frowning at it as if it was poison.

“Mother,” he asked suddenly.

“Yes, my dear.”

“Was Avice here last night?”

“Yes, she came in the afternoon, and was taken with a sudden faintness, poor girl. I was forced to accompany her home in my brougham?”

“Poor girl!” he repeated, mechanically.

“I cannot account for it, I am sure,” said his mother. “She was in the best of spirits when she first came; and as you had accidentally left the key in your study door—ahem!—it was proposed that we should rob you of the secrets which you have so long pent up. I told her that you could have no secrets from her, that you desired none.”

“And she—and she?”

“She went to the study. I left her there, and returned to find her very faint and ill, and hanging over the book with the brass clasps, in which you are always writing so earnestly,” answered his mother; “but I daresay she is better now. You must run over and see her after breakfast.”

“I am going now,” said he, rising.

“But my dear Edward, you have not touched your coffee or ——”

“I am going now,” he reiterated. “I cannot drink or eat. I am heart-sick.”

“It is so early—it is ——”

“Never too early for atonement or for reparation, as it is, I fear, too late for such bitter repentance as mine,” he

said, rising. "Mother, I must go now—this minute. I have done a cruel wrong. God grant that I may right it."

"My dear Edward," remonstrated the mother, "let me beg you to reflect. If Avice has been deceived in you; if she has found out how little love you have for her, is not the discovery better for you both?"

"You thought so!" he said harshly.

"Edward!" exclaimed the mother, "I!"

"This is no time for cavilling," he replied. "What I think may be as unjust as my own actions. I am going to Olverton House. I shall walk there."

"But do ——"

"Oh! let me be," he cried, peevishly; "there is no greater curse than petty intrusions on a man's great sorrow."

Mrs. Clifton said no more, and her son walked out of the room, and was soon after wending his way slowly along the Sanderstone road.

His heart began to beat rapidly the nearer he approached the residence of Mr. Stanmore, and no beggar could have crawled at a slower pace along the winding drive which led to the house.

It was striking nine o'clock from Sanderstone Church as he stood beneath the portico and knocked.

The servant could not help expressing his surprise by an ejaculation of "Mr. Clifton," as he stood face to face with the early visitor.

Clifton entered the hall.

"Where is Mr. Stanmore—Miss Hern?" he asked.

"Mr. Stanmore is in the garden, Sir, but Miss Hern, I don't know where Miss Hern is."

"Will you tell her I have come, and that I desire earnestly a few minutes conference," said he; "she will find me in the drawing-room."

Clifton strode towards the door of the room he had so often entered and departed from in the days of the long courtship which had ended yesterday.

He started back as he entered the room, for Avice Hern rose from a chair by the fire, and stood before him.

There was a red flush on the face of Clifton, which had no

counterpart on Avice's ; she stood with her hands resting heavily on the back of her chair, as if clinging to it for support, but the eye was steady, though the face was colourless.

The ghost of her old love glided across the room until checked by the glance of the dark eyes. He stopped, but still essayed no word to break that painful silence—he knew not what to say, or how to act when she confronted him with that condemning look. He knew that there was no atonement on his part for the life-long injury he had heaped on her, and there was nought to do but to go from her with a few words of poor excuse.

Excuse ! The very word brought the hot blood burning to his cheeks again. There was no excuse ; not even that of a coward which he could offer to Avice.

“Avice,” he began, and paused.

“Sir,” she answered in a low, but unfaltering tone.

“Avice !” he said again, imploringly.

“I—I had thought you would have spared me this meeting, Mr. Clifton,” murmured she ; “there is no reason for long cruel explanations—there is no desire on my part to listen to them, knowing how little of extenuation there can be.”

“Avice, do you let the wild ravings of a disappointment that occurred long ago, stand as a proof against my want of love or heart ?” he cried ; “do you believe I cannot—do not love you now ; that I would not choose you as my wife before all the world of women ?”

“You would choose me for the sake of your plighted word, and from that, Sir, I release you,” said Avice, looking down.

“Oh ! Avice, Avice, do not release me !”

“Ah ! Clifton, Clifton, there is no wiser course, even if my love were as strong and deep as yesterday's, and had never had its death-blow from the pages of your diary. I do not accuse you of duplicity, of winning me in pique for your own loss—in doing all but loving a simple, trustful girl, without even a pretty face to recommend her, or a grace that might have set well on her in your home. I—I—”

Her voice faltered so much now, that she was forced to stop.

“Avice, you misjudge me, by all past memories you wrong

me deeply. I beg of you—I implore you for my own happiness—I swear my own as well as yours.”

“You believe so now,” said Avice, with a sad shake of the head; “it is the influence of the moment, and that has always had too great weight with you, Mr. Clifton. It is your fault, Sir, it has been your bane in life, and I have suffered from it. No self-command, no sober thought, strengthened by a manly intellect, but ever succumbing to the reigning impulse, and repenting afterwards.”

“Miss Hern,” cried Clifton, impetuously; “did you ever love me—can I think it, now that you so coldly throw me off?”

“The question relates to the past, and I would forget it, Mr. Clifton,” said Avice. “The past is full of bitter memories, and all the sunshine has gone away from it never to come back. I did a foolish and unworthy action yesterday, in stealing to that study, and giving way to the sin of curiosity—for that I have fallen in your esteem, as I deserve. But I cannot regret it, I dare not, Clifton, though the truth has severed us and ground my woman’s pride to dust. I have no right to regret that truth which has saved you from false vows to God, and me from—no matter now, no matter!”

“Avice, all is not dead between us?” he implored; “we are not parted by that one cruel incident—we are not going to part without one hope of reconciliation, one promise from myself, which before God I swear——”

“Mr. Clifton, I must request your silence, entreat your departure, I cannot bear a further extension of this interview,” said Avice, interrupting; “if you will hear my final decision, I will attempt to utter it—there is no amendment to be made or wished.”

“I can but listen,” answered Clifton, gloomily.

“My woman’s heart and pride forbid anything but the breaking off of this engagement,” said Avice, with quivering lips, “and I would break it off, if there was a greater penalty attached than I had strength to bear. I say this calmly, in no heated moments, smarting under no sense of injury—that we can never be more than friends, may be less than friends, that the tie is broken, and you are free. I wish you every happiness; I will pray for it, and I even hope in a more worthy choice that you will gain it. You will forget all

about this engagement in a few months, and thank me in your heart for the course I have adopted. Let it cease from this moment—time will bring content—if not the waters of oblivion.”

He knew it was no use to stay, there was no word to urge, and no sign to make—she had said it, and there was no revocation of the edict. They were parted—they stood towards each other in their old position; she was the Avice who first came to Sanderstone with Rosamond, his first love!

They shook hands together—he would have kissed hers in reverence, but something held him back—and so they parted, and poor Avice Hern’s Ark of Promise went down in the great flood as he went his way alone.

“It was hard to bear—it was hard to bear,” she cried, when he was gone. “I loved him very much—more than he ever knew, or ever will know now; my life is barren—my poor, poor little heart so desolate!”



CHAPTER IV.

SOMETHING WRONG.

EDWARD CLIFTON, a few mornings after his interview with Avice Hern, packed up his portmanteau, introduced three or four manuscripts at one end of it, by way of make-weight, kissed his mother affectionately, shook his head at all inducements to remain at Sanderstone, even though a certain Rosamond’s name was mentioned, and started one morning for the city of London.

Nothing like London to drown a dissatisfaction of one’s self, and bring the mind to a more complacent train of reasoning. London, full of old friends; London, whose world is never too busy to flatter the prosperous; where there are many temptations to forgetfulness, many pursuits held out, many baits for ambition hanging almost within reach, many people who have sorrows of their own, and offer congenial companionship.

Yes, Edward Clifton went to London, with no settled purpose in view, although with a few half-formed ideas of a

new career, a deep study, a name in the list of great names, and such-like visionary projects, looming through the fog of his faculties.

He thought as he sallied away from home and his mother's arms, that he must have loved Avice after all, he was so horribly miserable ; everything was so flat and unprofitable, now all his old schemes had been crumpled together unceremoniously, and thrown away for ever.

He wrote a great deal of poetry before he departed, he also struck off the opening chapters of a tale, entitled "Broken Hearts," and put them into his portmanteau, and took them with him to that unfortunate city, already overwhelmed with poets and poetry, and burdened with broken hearts far more real than were to be found in the pages of his novel.

He left Avice Hern just as sedate and prim as ever ; her quiet plain looks, not a shade more sorrowful in company, and her attention absorbed in village wants and troubles, and sharing in them as if all her wants were satisfied, and there were no troubles of her own to fret over.

Avice Hern did not fall ill like Rosamond, did not require any change of air or scene ; she was content with Sanderstone and Olverton House, and all those trysting spots, and green lanes, which were terrible reminiscences now, and which made her heart bleed more often than her friends could imagine, gazing at that calm face, from which her black lace veil was fearlessly thrown back.

Yet Avice Hern suffered more than her weak-minded "sister," Rosamond—there was no romantic ideal in her thoughts, no future when the favoured one might hold her hand and tell his love again ; she was not separated against her will, she was sundered by her own convictions of that one's unworthiness—with Rosamond there was light in the future, with Avice there glimmered but the past—one looked forward amidst her present sorrows—the other looked back, and to ever look back on our regrets, avoiding the present and what is to come, caring not for either, is the sign of the deepest wound, and the most irreversible injury.

It seemed a rule in Olverton House—and a very good rule, too—to avoid all allusion to the mental trouble of its inmates, and to pass over all topics that might intrench too closely on the hidden sorrow.

For this reason neither Mr. Stanmore nor Rosamond

recurred to Clifton's name in the presence of Avice, although to Rosamond, Avice often felt the desire to unburthen her heavy grief, and sob out her tale upon the bosom of her "sister." But Mr. Stanmore half-guessed at the cause of the great change, and Rosamond remembering some peculiar antecedents was perfectly assured of it, so there was little occasion for the relation of a story.

About this time Miss Jane Stanmore blazed forth in a new character—she gave up the "girlish"—packed away the worldlies, particularly the attractive curls of the same shade to a nicety—assumed a sober demeanour, got partial to romantic reading, fond of deep sighs which were alarming from their suddenness, and became very, very fond of Avico Hern.

It was some weeks before Avice could believe or assign any reason for it, but the clue to the mystery unravelled itself in whispered sympathies and tiny hints.

Miss Jane Stanmore had found congeniality of sentiment—one who was suffering from the same pangs and torments, one who was a victim of misplaced love!

Yes, her "Walter" had trifled with her affections—though he had not uttered a word of significant meaning, and at times had in vulgar parlance "fought shy." Yet there was no mistaking the look of those piercing orbs—mistaking indeed! she should say not! he had been like the rest of the perfidious sex, and her hopes had been based on the sand of the sea-shore, and had consequently been engulfed at the first turn of the tide. Miss Stanmore had, therefore, a right to consign the remainder of her stock of affections to one situated like herself, and Avice having no voice in the matter, was compelled to receive the tender of her small miseries, and to be called in confidential moments a sister in distress.

Had Avice been disposed to dispute her claim to eternal sorrow, there had been no convincing Miss Jane Stanmore, and so she put up with it, consoling herself with having won upon Mr. Stanmore's sister at last, after many long years of that lady's indifference.

It was a little tedious to have but few spare moments for the indulgence of her own thoughts, to have this elderly confidante by her side in the garden, out in the lanes, accompanying her in her sick-visits, and when playing Lady

Bountiful, and to hear many mysterious allusions to soul-harrowing griefs and blighted aspirations.

Miss Jane caught a severe cold, too, and had inflammation of the lungs, and took to her bed for one long month, refusing all nurses but patient Avice, becoming peevish, even to Rosamond and the doctor, and only consoled by the presence of our heroine, who was constantly reading at her desire all the miserable poems and love stories to be found in the circulating libraries at Branscombe, to which town a grumbling groom or sulky page was sent on her especial missions thrice a week.

She got better in the beginning of the summer time, but came down stairs an old woman with a yellow wrinkled face, and suffering from a cough, that at times threatened to shake her to pieces, as she shivered and crouched before the fire. All the summer she could not do without her fire, and though she gave up her walks with her "dear girl" from sheer necessity, she was querulous and fidgety whenever Avice was absent. Time that had been lenient so long with her broad full face, pounced on it all at once, and scored his number of years, not forgetting compound interest, on her "countenance divine." It was all "Walter's" fault she considered—he had made her ill, and had given her that cold and inflammation, and that horrid grinding cough, which she was eternally petting with a tea-spoon, and everlasting syrups—it was nobody's fault but Walter's, and he would be answerable for her death—the traitor!

During this illness of her aunt, and her slow struggle to convalescence, Rosamond had almost come back to her old looks, and save the habitual air of sadness which she had worn from the hour her father stepped between her love and Arnold's, there were no signs of the great disappointment of her life in her outward character.

Mr. Stanmore imposed no restraint on Rosamond's actions, and made no inquiry concerning them. He had implicit trust in her obedience to his will and felt assured his daughter would never betray the confidence placed in her. He would as soon have thought of setting watch upon his sister or Avice, as of placing Rosamond under surveillance, or questioning her as to her solitary rambles, when Avice was Miss Stanmore's nurse, and his daughter had to fulfil many of Avice's commissions.

Did she ever meet Arnold Hern in the forest path, although there were no more visits required to Millthorn's cottage in the Black Hollow?—did she ever abuse her father's confidence by fostering Arnold's love, and was that the secret of her better health, and the brighter roses on her cheek?

Rosamond had become more intimate with Miss Mistleford of late, and Avice was a little jealous in that quarter, and did not like in her heart their long walks together, their conferences, in which she did not share, the evenings which Rosamond spent at Miss Mistleford's father's house, and where her guardian, never herself, went to fetch her home.

Rosamond went to the Shrubbery more often after Edward was away, and kept Mrs. Clifton company. Avice mused upon this occurrence, and thought she could bear to hear of Clifton and Rosamond being engaged then with very little pain—her sister was more suitable for him than herself; and he, how he did love her on that July 7th, 18—! and what a good match it would be for hearts and hands, and she—ah! how strange that would be too!—would be Rosamond's bridesmaid after all, and stand by her side assuring her, wishing her every happiness when they were married at last. Avice thought of all this in the moments sacred to herself, and free from the sighing lady down stairs by the fire, thought with the hands—that old trick—covering her face, and if there were tears stealing through the taper fingers now and then, still the wound was deep yet, and one not easily healed.

When the summer was growing strong, and Avice had been to see Martha Badge (who was as brisk and chirping as ever, and to whom Avice related her love story on the first evening of their meeting, as she would have done to a mother), and returned home again, there was a still greater change visible in the manner of Rosamond Stanmore, an instinctive habit of evading Avice and shunning conversation with her, which did not tend to brighten the spirits of our heroine. Affectionate, Rosamond was ever—it was her nature—but she had grown reserved, and no effort on Avice's part could break down the barrier that had risen up between them.

Avice did not show any airs, or toss her head when Miss Mistleford came to tea once or twice a week, but received

her with her honest, heart-speaking smile, and did her best to give Rosamond's friend a genial welcome, if it was only for Rosamond's sake. When Avice felt very weary, she would steal to her new friend's side and find relief in the eccentric affection Miss Stanmore condescended to exhibit.

These lengthy observations, necessary to the further development of this story, having been read or skipped as the case may be, we push our bark off from the shore and get under weigh again.

There must have been a certain amount of poetry in Avice's nature, though she never gave voice to it, she was so fond of moonlight, unless it is an idiosyncrasy of love complaints to take refuge in moonshine—a fact which, considering all circumstances, may be very possible.

Sanderstone by moonlight, with its winding roads, and its overhanging hills flinging their bold shadows, was worth the gazing at from the window of Avice's room which looked upon the garden, and here, hidden by the long sweeping curtains, would Avice sit and enjoy the scene, no feeble lamp or candle glimmering its contrast in the dark background of her chamber.

On the particular evening we have alluded to, Avice had sat longer than usual at the window, but it was one of those warm summer nights scented with the perfume of flowers, and sweet grass and wild briars growing in the hedges, a perfume which might vie with the spice laden air of the tropics, and come off none the worse for the comparison.

The hall clock had struck two, and Sanderstone church clock had, with a characteristic disregard to punctuality, sounded the hour on its cracked old bell five minutes or so after the proper time, and Avice sat still at the window musing.

Night was almost her only opportunity for reverie, since Miss Jane Stanmore had demonstrated such passionate affection, therefore we trust the gentle reader will excuse the late hours of our Wildflower.

Avice had not had the slightest intention of sitting up until two o'clock, she had drawn a chair to the window for five minutes, no longer, but she had forgotten all about the time, the moonlight and the landscape of black and silver, and was thinking a good deal, and crying a little, and thus had

passed the night, and the first two hours of the morning, till the hall clock finally had roused her to a consciousness of her nocturnal dissipation.

When Sanderstone clock followed the more punctual time-piece of Olverton House, Avice pushed the chair back, and rose with something very like a sigh. The sigh was changed to something very like a start, when she was on the opposite side of the room near the door. Avice was not a nervous girl, but her heart beat at a rapid rate, and she had some difficulty in breathing freely, for it is not a pleasant thing to hear strange noises outside your bed-room door at two in the morning.

It was a peculiar rustling noise, such as a ghost in a heavy silk dress might have made, as it promenaded on the landing; and Avice deliberated on the expediency of opening her chamber door, and seeking for a rational solution to the mystery.

"It must have been my imagination," whispered Avice to herself; "there is nothing to hurt me outside. Heigho! I must not sit up late, and get full of fancies."

She fearlessly opened the door and peered forth into the dark landing place. Nothing was there—all was silent, save the tick-tick of the clock which came sounding up the well-staircase in a dismally monotonous manner.

Avice was returning to her room satisfied with the result of her scrutiny, when the alarming thought struck her that there was a current of cool air drifting up the stairs and blowing on her as she listened.

There must be a window unclosed in the house, or else—God forbid that! some one had just entered or departed by the street door, leaving it open, and if so, it was the stranger passing her room who had first given rise to her suspicions.

Avice went back for a thick shawl, which she flung over her head and shoulders, and then crept slowly down the dark stairs, guiding her way by the hand-rail. Better to descend cautiously to the hall without a light and satisfy herself she thought, than to needlessly frighten the household by her own imaginary fears.

She knew there was an alarm-bell within reach, if anything serious should be threatened, therefore, mustering up her womanly courage, and she was not lacking in that quality

for so small a personage—she stole down stairs to confront the shadowy enemy.

There was moonlight in the hall, from two slips of windows with bars before them, and from the glass fanlight over the great door. Somewhat reassured, Avice advanced towards the door, and stretched out her hand; the bolts were withdrawn—the lock unsecured, and the door ajar!

Avice had to recover breath before she could proceed to a further investigation, and to sit on the last stair she had descended, and seek to curb the palpitation at her bosom. Some one had gone out, or come in!

She grew calmer, more than that she prayed softly to herself, not for her own safety, but prompted by a dread surmise, for Rosamond her sister.

She rose, at last, and dragged her trembling steps up the stairs, passed her own room, and Miss Jane Stanmore's, from which a complicated snore was issuing, and stopped at Rosamond's door. It was unlocked; she entered—the room was empty!

Avice looked round her wildly, and then, not even in the first night when love dawned, or that night not long since when love faded out for ever, did she sob so violently, or feel the bitterness of such appalling sorrow.

"Oh! Rosamond, Rosamond, you of all others—where was the teaching of a life-time, your own name, your father's honour, to restrain you on a night like this," cried Avice, "better to have died at Florence, than to have come home to break your father's heart!"

But there was food for more reflection; Rosamond intended to return—there were no signs of her jewels having been abstracted, there was a bracelet shining in the moonlight on the toilet table, and a letter half finished on her open desk. She would come back to that home from which she had stolen out like a thief in the night, and Avice felt it her duty to confront her, to learn the secret motives which had impelled her sister—so gentle, innocent and good as she had ever been—to forfeit common respect to herself, and suggest by her own conduct such cruel suspicions.

"There must be something more behind," cried Avice, as she stole down stairs to the hall again, "a mystery which Rosamond can alone unfathom. The moral instruction of

nineteen years is not forgotten in a single night. And yet—oh! God forgive me—and yet!”

There was no warmth in the summer air now, it seemed laden with the icy fangs of the cruellest winter of despair, as Avice with the shawl drawn tightly round her, and the thick heavy hall mat covering her feet, sat crouching on the stairs, awaiting the wanderer's return.

CHAPTER V.

CONFESSION.

THE hall clock strikes three, and no Rosamond.

Sanderstone clock, limping in the race of time, comes to the goal when the long steel hand of its rival at Olverton House has scored another five minutes on the dial, and its harsh notes, muffled by distance, fall upon the listening sense of the shivering watcher on the stairs.

All that weary watch, with the door ajar, and the wind which has begun to play without soughing through the crevice, and the hollow tick-tick of the clock—ticking with that sepulchral tone common to clocks after midnight—giving note of the minutes hurrying on to “Four.” A long—long watch, and still Avice sits patiently and prays.

Oh! Rosamond Stanmore, couldst thou but hear the fervency of those simple prayers, whispered in the dark hall, streaked here and there with moonlight, see how the watcher never tires in supplication to Him who is eternally on watch, thou wouldst love thy Avice a thousand-fold more passionately, and fail not to remember the warmth of her devotion, and to reverence it in the coming hour.

The clock ticks on, and runs its race with Sanderstone's, the moonlight tracery upon the marble chequered pavement weaves new patterns of window frames and fanlight with the progress of the hour, and still no Rosamond comes back.

“Four!”

Avice holds her breath with fear, a strange nervous fear lest the sound of the noisy hammer on the bell should wake her guardian, Miss Stanmore, or the servants sleeping in the

house, lest pale faces should peer from doors or over banisters, and their voices ask hollowly why the clock strikes so loud to-night.

But all is silent, and the lagging church-bell gives four notes to the darkness—as solemnly this time to superstitious Avice, as though it tolled for the dead.

Does it toll for those dead to all sense of right—for the lost upon the high-road?

Will she come back?—has she gone “for good?”—is the father to come down in the morning and find no daughter’s smile or kiss, to bid him welcome to another day?—has the bird so weak of wing found another resting place, and will the sun rise on a home-wreck and disgrace?

No, no—thank God! there are hasty footsteps lightly falling on the gravel-walk outside, which rouse Avice to a sense of her position, and of the painful task before her—to the knowledge that Rosamond is returning, and is but a few paces from the door.

Avice rises, her pale face gleaming from the hooded shawl, and awaits with upheaved breast the entrance of her “sister.”

A hand gently pushes back the door, and Rosamond stands on the broad threshold, and with her affrighted eyes glares in at Avice. The moonlight streams in one silver flood into the hall, as if it would bear witness to the colloquy of those two spectral figures both silent and motionless as death, in the first moment of surprise.

Rosamond is the first to move—she casts a hasty, yet hesitating look behind her, as if weighing the impulse to retreat against the duty to return.

Avice detects the backward glance, and running towards Rosamond, clasps her by the wrist, and draws her quickly into the house.

“Think not of that—think not of that!” says Avice, in a subdued earnest tone of voice, “whatever sin or folly may have urged you out this night, whatever guilty heedlessness has so wholly changed your nature, think not of going back to those evil agents who tempted you from home.”

Rosamond makes no reply, but stands passively regarding Avice as she pleads, and is still speechless, when Avice, after hurriedly securing the fastenings of the door, again confronts her.

"Oh, Rosamond! will you trust in me this once?" cries Avice, clasping the cold right hand in both her own, "will you give ear to what I have to say, and heart to feel—will you listen to all I may have to suggest? Will you confide fearlessly in me—I will be just and lenient—your mediator, your own sister—you called me sister once, dear. Speak, speak, not this awful silence which makes me fear the worst, the very, very worst!"

"What right have you to spy upon me, Avice?" asks Rosamond, peremptorily, as she withdraws her hand; "to sting me by your assumption of my folly, heedlessness, or sin? I am Mr. Stanmore's daughter!"

"Thank God you feel and know it!" says our heroine; "but oh! Rosamond, was it like his daughter to choose this hour of the night to leave his home, abuse his trust? What else but sin or folly could have prompted you?"

"There was no hour fitting," answers Rosamond; "all others but the one I chose were full of jealous spies. I thought this one, at least, was sacred, but you have proved the falsity of that delusion. I am going to my room."

"May I follow?" pleads Avice.

"If it please you," replies Rosamond, "I can offer no resistance."

With a haughty mien she sweeps by Avice, and goes slowly up the stairs, our heroine following like the one humiliated, so deep and bitter is her sorrow, aggravated as it is by the cold, arrogant demeanour Rosamond assumes.

They are in Rosamond's room, and Rosamond steadily lights her night lamp, and then, with one hand leaning heavily on the dressing-table, waits for any further speech Avice may have to deliver. There is none of her old looks of timidity and vacillation as she stands with her full blue eyes unshrinkingly fixed on her companion, and her fine figure drawn to its queenly height.

"Say all that you have to say, Miss Hern, for I am weary."

"Rosamond, do I deserve this coldness—this thrusting back of the affection of a life?"

For a moment, Rosamond's look softens, but she checks the natural impulse, and steels herself against her. The white brow again contracts.

"Let it be so, then," says Avice, mournfully. "I had hoped another result from this sought for interview, trusting to that affection you have endeavoured to stifle in your heart. But it can never be stifled, Rosamond—it is impossible. I know it by my feelings towards you, by your own disposition, which no time can change; by the memory of your poor mother who taught us that our surest trust was in each other, and of whom we learned the lesson of our mutual love. I am no spy, sister—you should have known me better. Discovering by chance your absence from this house, and unable to assign one reason for its motive, fearful that wily brains had set a snare into which your unsuspecting nature might have been betrayed, I waited, prayed for your return as I would have waited, prayed for any confiding, innocent girl, though I had never known her till that moment. I had a feeble hope that in the hour of our meeting, she, for whom I watched, would in remembrance of our early days—days of childhood's love and faith, have related her wild story, trusting to me in the greater sorrow, as she did in those more trivial when she was younger, and called me 'sister Avice;' for it must be a sorrow or an injury that led her forth this night—but I have been deceived. Well, well! I will believe in brighter days, and store my love for that time when Rosamond Stanmore may need it more than now."

Sadly Avice turns to depart, and sadly Rosamond watches her with the haughtiness of look transformed to anxiety, remorse and pain.

"Avice."

The voice is very low, but it reaches the figure by the door. Avice stops, hesitates, returns.

It is the old Rosamond again—the loving, gentle girl, strong in her devotion, and weak in all save heart—the tender flower that the first frost would wither in its bloom!

"Avice, I will tell you—I will have no secrets from you, dearest; I said long since that I would tell you—I—I never made the promise that he wished."

"He!" murmurs Avice.

"Ah! don't misjudge him yet—not a word against my Arnold, Avvy, for the sake of that old love you say I have been studying to lose, but which has not been lost, and never shall be, dear," cries Rosamond, hanging round her sister's

neck ; " there, let me stand thus, and tell you everything and hide my head when the love-tale is too silly, or I grow too fervent, in your faithful bosom. God bless you, sister Avvy ! you will forgive me if I have been rash and wilful ? "

The fond pressure of Avice's arms around her is all the reply she makes.

" When I met you in the hall to-night, so accusing in your looks," begins Rosamond, " I thought you had betrayed me, and had watched me from the house, but that was a very wrong and cruel thought, and it has passed, my sister, passed away for ever."

" I believe it."

" Avice, I went to meet Arnold Hern," says Rosamond, in a low voice, " I went to meet him at Millthorn's cottage where we could talk of, and build up our future without fear of a betrayal. He tells me I am watched at other times, that spies are set upon my actions, and he has been away the last week, and only just returned. I could but meet him when he asked so urgently, and pleaded, oh ! so hard, and I had not seen him for seven whole days. You are shuddering, Avice ! "

" Go on, dear, go on."

" I have met him once or twice before—I have no fear in making this avowal, or of meeting him. I love him dearly—I know that he loves me. We shall be happy soon, I think so now," she cries, with buried head.

" O ! Rosy, dear, why did you go—why have you trusted yourself to the mercy of that man at this hour ? " says Avice ; " you young, and unsuspecting of half the evil in man's nature ? "

" But—but hear me out, dear Avvy, there is more to tell ; I—I cannot, I don't know how to say that—that," the arms tighten round Avice more and more, and the fair blushing face nestles still closer to the heaving chest, " that I am—I am his wife, and we are married ! "

" Oh ! Rosamond, Rosamond, Rosamond ! "

Avice can utter but that name, can but cry out in her profound amazement the name of the fair girl passionately clinging to her. She knows not whether to be glad or sorry—glad that Rosamond is above suspicion, and happy in her love, or sorry that there is no stepping back, that

she has chosen once for all in life, for good or bad—for ever.

"Hush! hush! Avvy," says Rosamond, "they may hear you, dear, and I have a little to explain. After—after the letter which Arnold—my Arnold—sent by Katie Millthorn, I met him by appointment, and listened to his griefs. He told me how long he had been tortured by cruel doubt, lest I should have forgotten him in Florence, how truly he would ever love me, even if I turned from him that instant, and never saw him more. We met again and again—Miss Mistleford came upon us once in our lovers' rambles, and we were compelled to take her into confidence—she has been very kind, so has her father, who used to allow Arnold to come to his house when I was there. You listen, Avice?"

"Yes, dear."

"It was arranged at last, that we should be married," continues Rosamond, raising her bright blushing face, now the most embarrassing part of the story has been got over, "and that one early day, I should break the secret of my marriage to my father, and plead forgiveness on my knees, for myself and husband. So Arnold went to London and got the license, and one morning Arnold, Arnold's father, Mr. and Miss Mistleford, and myself started in the carriage for Branscombe, and Arnold and I were married at Branscombe church. I used to say that dear old Sanderstone church should hear my bridal vow, and Avice be my bridesmaid—but it was not to be, and my Avice was too strict, too good to have been made a confidante in a secret marriage. Don't you think so, dear?"

"I am afraid I should have offered serious opposition—heigho!"

"So we were married, and kept the wedding at Mr. Mistleford's," says Rosamond, "and though I cried at times, to think how wicked it seemed to papa, to you, and aunt, yet we were all happy—so very happy!"

"Dear Rosamond, it is too late for my comments upon the match," says Avice, "or to speak of the deceit Mr. Mistleford and his foolish daughter have practised against their old friend, Mr. Stanmore—I will say nothing, but God grant you peace, happiness, prosperity, a faithful husband, and an undying love, a long blissful life, everything on earth

which Heaven can give—everything, my darling, everything ! ”

Avice flings her arms round Rosamond once more, and clasps her with renewed fervour to her breast, as she sobs forth a sister's blessing. Rosamond cries for a few minutes with her, and then the storm is over, and they are walking slowly two and fro, with arms round each other's waist, and but a mistiness before their eyes.

Rosamond chiefly talks, and Avice listens ; she talks of her timid heart, and how she has put off day by day the revelation of her marriage, fearing her father's glance, so accusing in its very calmness ; fearing to wound him, as she is well aware he will be wounded on the day all is disclosed, and she acknowledges the deceit practised against his dearest wishes ; she talks of how she shall like Avice to stand beside her on that day of confession, and reassure her by her presence—how certain she is that her dear papa will forgive her, after the first blow has been received, and he has recovered from the shock, and become fully aware of the fallacy of opposition. How happy she shall be then, when he calls Arnold his son, and joins their hands together, and gives them his blessing in his deep rich voice, and she can take the crowd of jewelled hoops from the fourth finger of her left hand, and conceal no longer the wedding-ring which her Arnold, swearing to love and honour her till the parting of death between them, gave her at God's altar, his pledge of sacred troth !

The grim grey morning finds them with red sleepless eyes pacing the room, and Rosamond still pouring out the treasured hopes of her heart, and talking of dear Arnold and the perfect bliss of the future life that is awaiting her.

Ah ! drop the curtain, there is no perfect bliss even when Hero and Leander are a model couple, and do not quarrel from one year's end to another—drop the curtain over those young women in the chamber, wherein the morning dawn lights up their faces, dawning, too ! On one the dawn of an imaginative happiness—and on the other, the prescient knowledge, subdued by prayer and hope, of coming trouble.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH THE STORY IS TOLD.

MR. STANMORE, unaware of the front door of Olverton House having been left ajar all night, or of that greater secret connected with his daughter and a wedding-ring, was in the best of tempers at the breakfast table the next morning, and made his jests on passing affairs, or on things arising from the instant, with more than usual relish.

This was not the first time that Mr. Stanmore, by a remarkable coincidence, had had more than an extra share of good spirits at the very moment when a grave disclosure was impending over him, but then he was a man not troubled with presentiments—gentlemen who have held office under government seldom are.

Mr. Stanmore's spirits had taken a turn for the better the last few months—a habit of thinking far beyond present company had almost entirely left him, and he was less morose in his worst humours, and less satirical in his best.

It had been arranged between Rosamond and Avice, that the disclosure of the former's marriage should be made at this very breakfast-table, when no cares of the day should have put Mr. Stanmore out of temper, and when Miss Jane had not come down from her room; for although that latter lady might have assumed the office of mediator, yet an eccentric habit, not common to ladies, of breaking in upon explanations and observations with questions and answers of her own, could be easily dispensed with on that morning in particular.

But Rosamond's whole courage deserted her at the appointed time, as it had done day after day, opportunity after opportunity for weeks, and despite Avice's encouraging looks and reassuring pressures of the hand underneath the table, she sat pale, trembling and silent, and even gave a sigh of relief when her father left the room at the conclusion of the meal.

"To-morrow—let it be to-morrow," said Rosamond, in

answer to our heroine's expostulation, "I feel very weak and cowardly to day!"

"But think of Arnold," urged Avice, availing herself of every means to support Rosamond's failing courage; "he is in suspense too, dear sister."

"Ah! Arnold," replied Rosamond, "yes, I will tell my father when he returns. Yes, I *will* tell him. Arnold must be considered."

The door opened and Mr. Stanmore, with hat and riding cane in hand, re-entered and, Rosamond fell back behind Avice, and like a frightened child clung to the skirts of her dress.

They had both risen from the table, and were standing on his entrance.

"Now girls," said he, "are you coming for a ride this morning, or must I wend my way alone? What say you both—shall I order the horses?"

"Yes, papa!" cried Rosamond eagerly.

Mr. Stanmore's large brown eyes steadily fixed themselves on the faces of the maidens, and a look of mingled curiosity and apprehension began to settle therein, as he surveyed them.

Avice was a shade paler with the consciousness of the coming revelation, and Rosamond trembled in every limb, as her fingers retained their tenacious clasp of the morning dress of her adviser.

"What, more secrets, Rosamond!" said he with a forced laugh; "more traitors in the camp, and bomb-shells smoking at the fuse! Well, what is it?"

Rosamond in vain essayed an answer to his question.

"Come, come, confess," said he, "I cannot understand this secret antipathy to *the father*, which possesses the minds of all young girls, and repels them from an avowal on the subject of which he might feel as greatly interested as they. I find it so everywhere—boys, girls, young men and women are all hypocrites to the father, hold aloof from his heart—his great yearning heart, which his children often wound by their reserve—and pour out their confidence to the friend of the day, the companion of an hour, in preference to the staff of a life-time. Ah! I suppose we are too cross-grained, too worldly and matter-of-fact to invite our children

to unbosom their stories, eh, daughter? What not a word after all this persuasion, Rosamond?"

"Oh! tell him, tell him, Avice," cried Rosamond, as Avice made a movement to withdraw, "do not leave me with my faltering tongue, my broken speech, to say all that there is to be said to-day."

"Avice, what is this?" he cried, turning pale too.

"Rosamond," urged Avice in reply to the weak affrighted girl, "speak to your father—it is best!"

Rosamond with a stifled cry released her hold of Avice's dress, and sprang towards Mr. Stanmore, who opening his arms to receive her, folded her to his broad heaving chest on which she hid her head.

"There, there," said he, "say on—I think I can bear the worst you have to tell now, praying for pardon—is it pardon?—in these arms which last held you thus a little girl. Don't go, Avice unless she wishes it."

"I do not wish her to leave me," murmured Rosamond, "I wish her to speak, to say what is to be said—I feel I cannot—I have not the power."

"Avice, will you take pity on this penitent?" asked Mr. Stanmore. "I fear she is too weak indeed. Now Avice?"

He folded her closer to his breast and breathed hard.

"I would rather the daughter's lips had confessed the secret, Mr. Stanmore," said Avice with a painful beating at the heart, against which she pressed a hand, "deeply intererested as I am, I feel it is not my place to tell you what has happened. I feel my explanation—my intercession may but wound you more."

"Ah! Avice, Avice, you have not forgotten our interview in the orchard," said he, forcing a laugh a second time; "but we shall not quarrel, I give you my true word."

"How can I begin?" answered Avice, "how is it possible to spare you least of all?"

Mr. Stanmore started.

"It is a great revelation," continued Avice, "it brings about such change, neccsitates so great a command of yourself and feelings, that I—I feel myself almost incapable. I would prepare you to receive the tidings Rosamond desires me to relate with that gentle consideration due from a father to his child. What has passed is irrecoverable,

and my dear sister's happiness hangs on your course for the future. I cannot doubt that it will be a generous one for her sake and your own. Rosamond is married ! ”

His head drooped forwards and he gave a low moan ; but there was no flush of anger on his face, no sign of fierce words rising to his lip. He but held the agitated girl closer in his arms, as if shielding her from evil.

“ Her love was strong and passionate, and there was no resisting it,” said Avice ! “ she loved too earnestly to consider any will save his who won her heart before we went to Florence. For Rosamond's sake and peace of mind, she trusts you will forgive her choice, and hold out the hand of friendship to her husband.”

“ She has chosen between us,” he murmured hoarsely, “ and the hand of *friendship* can never be honestly offered to Arnold Hern. What, not a word to say, even now, Rosamond ? ” said he to her ; “ nothing but these scalding tears which argue so ill for happiness—why surely you are happy now ? ”

“ If I have your forgiveness, papa,” said Rosamond, in faint tones. “ If you will believe what a struggle it was to deceive you, even at the last moment, and how my duty, balanced against my love for *him*, weighed equally and tortured me with cruel suspense. Forgive, forgive me, dear papa ! I loved him very much—I love him so much more now that I am his wife—he is so good, and kind, and noble ! ”

“ Ay, all that is admirable, like Crichton,” said he in reply. “ There I forgive you,” kissing her ; “ what can I do less, now the Great Seal is set upon your—happiness ! I have taken it all very calmly, and received this dreadful news with Spartan stoicism, have I not ? No passion, no melodramatic raving and paternal curses—quite a model of a good father ! There, go and tell your aunt, or shall Avice act as mediator in that quarter too ? ”

Rosamond, glad to hurry from the room and hide her embarrassment, and her blushing, tear-stained face, flew from her father's arms to the door, and left Mr. Stanmore and Avice Hern alone together.

How his features changed when the young wife had quitted him—with what a weary look he flung himself into his chair, and groaned in bitter anguish !

Avice stood wistfully regarding him. She longed to pour forth some words of consolation, to cheer him by a picture of his daughter's happiness, her peace and contentment in the future—to speak of her cousin Arnold in such terms as should reconcile the father to him, and make him regard less gloomily the prospect of the separation from his child.

He saw her struggling with her power of utterance and said—

“Not a word for me, Avice, not one word ! I shall be better in a minute—stay where you are, don't go.”

The minute passed, and he turned round in his chair and faced Avice with a countenance on which ten more years appeared to have suddenly settled, each with a tenfold weight of care.

“They have all gone !” said he, mournfully stretching out his arms, and then letting them drop heavily to his side ! “they will come back no more, they leave a void whose emptiness is an eternal horror. The hopes of a father, his schemes for the welfare of an only child, his study of her future, crushed to atoms in a moment ; there is nothing left but humiliation, now !”

“We must not think that, Sir—trust in—”

“Oh ! we must trust—*trust*,” interrupted he bitterly. “I have trusted in my child, and she deserts me ; I have trusted in the world, and it is false ; I have trusted in the lessons Rosamond was taught, and they are thrown aside in recklessness. What is there left for me to trust in, Avice—but Arnold Hern ?”

“You have still a daughter left, Sir,” said Avice, stealing to his side, and laying her hands upon his shoulders, “one who will try her best to save you from the loneliness of home, and to fill up the gap left by Rosamond's departure.”

He trembled as her hands rested confidently upon him, and there was a swimming in the eyes which met Avice's. He laid one hand upon hers a moment, and replied,

“‘Daughter—daughter !’ this is a sacred title, which is alone for Rosamond. Thank you, Avice, a thousand thanks—but not daughter.”

Somewhat pained, Avice made no answer, but stood by his side, her hands still resting lightly on his shoulder.

“And you would love me as a father, Avice ?”

"Yes, Sir."

"I am not worthy of your affection then—a cold ingrate with a withered heart. There is something so holy in a daughter's love, that you must not usurp Rosamond's place in *my* affection—no, no, of course not, for—for, I have done with daughters!"

After a long silence he continued.

"After all that I have said concerning this ill-fated match, after our long journey, the sojourn at Florence, the study which I have made to keep them separate, the expression of my own will concerning it, to be deceived like this! The old saying—

'Sigh not for children, you will love them much,
And care will follow love!'"

"And love will follow care again," added Avice.

"In books."

"In life—for care is love's twin brother, and there is no disuniting them," said Avice, "we care alone for what we love."

"If any one had asked me a few weeks since, what would have been my intended course of action supposing my daughter had despised all paternal authority, had set aside my dearest wish, and flung herself away on a man I can but hate," he said, between his set teeth, "had married him in open defiance of her father's will, and her own peace on earth, I should have answered 'if she do this at any time, I cast her off for ever'—and yet I forgive her, Avice, at the first word, and utter not one reproach."

"You regret not your forgiveness, Mr. Stanmore?"

"I dare not."

"Dare not?"

"Ay," he replied, "I dared not when she hung about my neck and cried so passionately, for I felt that those tears were the first drops in her ocean of sorrow, and that misfortune would come soon enough without my ban upon the marriage. It will, Avice, it will—I feel there is no resisting it, no stemming it back, and knowing that, I dared not mar the few happy days which yet remain for her."

"You take too dark a view of the case, Sir," said Avice,

"I do not say their union will be free from crosses—what union is? I do not say that Rosamond's estimate of her husband will always be the same, or that the romantic ideal will glow for ever in the brightest of colours, but I am sure there will be days of sunshine following any little storm."

"If the first storm strike her not down with its intensity," replied Stanmore, "but no more of this! If it be possible, I will hope against conviction; I will see in Arnold Hern a fitting husband for my daughter, and I will not cause her one pang by my reception of him at our first meeting, although the knowledge of what he has stolen from me, is like the knowledge which lost Eden—bitter, bitter. He has won the prize, and I am childless!"

He rose from his chair with a heavy sigh like a woman's.

"Will you be kind enough, Avice, to write to your uncle and—and Arnold in my name, and invite them this evening to our house?" said he, "we must be good friends, and celebrate the wedding, you know, Avice."

"But will *you* not write, Mr. Stanmore?"

"Candidly, I am afraid the disclosure is too recent for me to be trusted with a pen," answered he, "some lurking ill-feeling might betray itself in my polite epistle. I must have time to work up the part I have to play—that is, the amiable father worthy of so accomplished a son-in-law. If you will be my amanuensis, I shall feel indebted?"

"Very well, Sir," said Avice mournfully.

"If you will give the notes to the groom, he will ride to the Hall at once, Avice," added he, "the sooner all is over now the better."

"Your horse is at the door, Sir," said the servant, as he entered.

"Take it back to the stable, I shall not ride out this morning," said Stanmore, and muttering something about 'The State,' he walked slowly from the room.

"Thank Heaven there are no more secrets now," whispered Avice to herself, "and that he has borne the revelation with his own noble firmness, but why—why was he so very cool to me?"

Could Avice Hern have seen the firm man—the man cast in the iron mould of government, when the study door was locked upon the world.

CHAPTER VII.

MONTAGUE AND CAPULET SHAKE HANDS.

"THE great man at Olverton House lowers his proud head a bit, Arnold," said Walter Hern, as he tossed Avice's letter across the table to his son.

"What did I tell you?" inquired Arnold, "did I not say he would come round soon enough, when the bird he jealously prized had sought another nest?"

"That letter is in Avice's handwriting," said Walter.

"What care I for that!" cried Arnold, fiercely, "he dictated it—he brought his cursed pride low enough to acknowledge me when this note was written."

"You will be happy and comfortable now, Arnold boy," remarked Walter Hern; "we shall have Rosamond at the Hall, and must give over our evening parties, eh?"

"Perhaps," he answered, "for Rosamond is not fond of noise—oh! yes, we shall be happy to the end of our lives. Stanmore thinks that I cannot govern my temper—we shall see."

"I suppose you would rather live here than have a separate establishment, Arnold?" said Walter.

"Humph," mused Arnold, "why do you ask?"

"Because if you wish to get rid of the old man, I can spare a little to build a villa, or anything of that," replied he, "but unfortunately the funds won't stand another Hall."

"We've been going rather fast," said Arnold.

"Rather," assented Walter; "but we shall make it all straight enough when we're steady old boys, and you a respectable married man, and the father of a family. Ho! ho! ho!—I think I see you Arnold, boy, nursing your first baby, chucking it under its fat chin with the hand that shot the horse. But you have not answered my question—the villa or the Hall?"

"The Hall."

"That's right," cried Walter, clapping him on the back, "that's filial."

"I suppose it's pride," said Arnold, "but I could no more leave this great house to live in a small one than I could fly. I should feel that I had inherited some misfortune. No, the Hall for ever!"

Walter's jaw fell, but he made no comment. And what did it matter if Arnold's reasons for remaining with his father were a trifle selfish?—boys will be boys—and he, Walter, was selfish in his youth, and did not love his father. He had no doubt that it was quite natural. It pained him a little, but his feelings—what did he know of feelings before he redeemed Arnold from the gipsies? Had Hern grown sensitive with the fortune into which he had stepped, and which he had been doing his best to dissipate, in "taking the shine," as he called it, out of the Sanderstone gentry, and the two real baronets who lived somewhere in the shire. He had attended the principal races, too, with Arnold boy, and had betted hard, and lost hard in proportion.

Walter Hern and Arnold went in state to Olverton House, with a powdered coachman on the box of the carriage, and two powdered footmen hanging on behind, and everything grand and ceremonious.

Neither of the gentlemen felt perfectly cool and unembarrassed when the servant flung open the door, and announced the name of Hern.

Mr. Stanmore was the first to advance and take Arnold by the hand.

"Mr. Arnold Hern," said he, "we will not speak of the past; standing in our new position towards each other, any recurrence to it would be extremely painful to us both. If I forget not—I forgive. You have taken my daughter for a wife, that cancels every wrong. She has placed her happiness in your keeping, and you, like a true husband, will esteem it your first care."

He looked somewhat wistfully at Arnold, who answered,

"You may trust me, Sir."

He meant it, too; his marriage had been to recent for any of the true nature to peep out; he loved Rosamond, and she loved him so dearly, that how could he do wrong? Ah! how very happy they were going to be.

There was a vacant seat by the side of Rosamond, which Arnold took as his right, and the young couple soon had

little care for the talk of others, and were living in a world of their own.

Walter Hern was the lion of the party that evening, he had never been in so good a temper, and never had had such a flow of spirits—he even made Mr. Stanmore laugh! He talked of everything; of the Hall—of Rosamond, of Arnold, of his horses, dogs, and game. He talked to everybody; to Miss Jane Stanmore more than the rest, who did not brighten up under the host of attentions which he lavished on her—her cold was worse than ever, and her hollow cough kept her very much depressed.

Avice sat quietly regarding Arnold and Rosamond, and wondering whether one or the other would ever repent of the secret marriage at Branscombe church.

Was it for the best after all, or was it for the worst? and in either case was it to be avoided after Rosamond's first impressions had ripened into love? How strange it all seemed to Avice—there was Rosamond's love, which had threatened to be lost or crushed out of her by opposition, acknowledged by her friends, and hallowed by the holy tie of marriage; and there was her own affection, on which every one had smiled and offered encouragement, that had promised much happiness and peace, and had had not a cloud in its Heaven of hope, struck out from her bosom, torn from that heart on which it had left its indelible scar.

The rival houses were no more, the Herns and Stanmores were linked hand in hand for life—there was to be nothing but feasting and good fellowship from that day forth. How pleasantly the evening passed, Mr. Stanmore witty and good-tempered; his son-in-law as gentle as a lamb, and Rosamond with joy almost too deep for words, blushing reserved to every one but Arnold. Once in the evening she and Arnold came and sat by the side of Avice, and Rosamond said,

“You and Arnold have so long misunderstood each other, Avice, that it is time you should be better acquainted, and become firmer friends, if only for the sake of poor little me. Arnold,” turning to her husband, “we are indebted to Avice for our present felicity, she has been our faithful mediator.”

“Has it been my fault, dearest, if Miss Hern has long kept me at arm's length?” he replied, with a half-laughing glance at Avice.

"We begin with fresh resolutions to-night, cousin Arnold," said Avice, extending her hand, "and we will begin fresh friends."

"With all my heart."

After supper when they were standing in one group, Mr. Stanmore in the midst, he said,

"Mr. Arnold, you will spare me Rosamond for two days, I hope?—I ask it as a great favour."

"If you wish it, Mr. Stanmore," answered Arnold, "certainly."

"Then, in two days will you fetch her from Olverton House? I shall have learned how to part with her more easily then, and have taught my tongue to call her Mrs. Hern," said he. "For two days she must be my daughter, sacrifice her husband to my pleasure, never mention his name or the name of marriage, but be Rosamond Stanmore for forty eight hours more of life. At the expiration of that time, I can shake hands with her, and say, 'good-bye.'"

"We have been talking to-night of a trip to Germany," said Arnold. "I think, Rosamond, we may as well make our first start at the expiration of those two days."

"It will be a change," said Mr. Stanmore, dryly.

"Ah! Arnold's fond of change," cried Walter, "he hates monotony—he always did."

"He will not think married life monotony, I hope," said Stanmore, with a quick glance at Arnold, "it is a weakness many of either sex are prone to."

"Monotony, indeed!" echoed Arnold.

"Forty-eight hours, then, and you are her lord and master," said Stanmore, "and I resign all control for ever—I will not say how reluctantly, lest I should pain more here than myself. And Mr. Arnold Hern, although you stole her from me," with a smile, "I shall not let her be a portionless bride in revenge for disobedience."

They took their departure, and Rosamond was left with her father in her old home. She did her best to sustain the character Mr. Stanmore had desired, and though she thought of dear Arnold all those two days, and counted the hours that would intervene before he came to take her on her honeymoon trip, still she never mentioned his name to her father.

They were not even happy days to Mr. Stanmore—the

consciousness that everything was for the last time was a painful knowledge, there was to be no more of this song, or that duet with Avice, the daughter sat by his side, or walked out with him, with her hand on his arm for but a few hours longer, and then she would lean more trustfully and affectionately on the arm of the stranger, than ever she had clung to him. But would the arm support her in the hour of tribulation as he would have done, if God had willed it so? He prayed it might, but he felt it never would!

How the father watched the child with his large earnest eyes; how he begrudged every moment that rapidly flitted by—how, when the first day had passed, it seemed as if half the best feelings in his nature had dried up, and on the second, as if they were all laid to rest in the deep grave of by-gone recollections.

On the third day he came down to breakfast so dark and gloomy, that Rosamond sprang into his arms, and cried:

“You must not think that I am going away for ever, dear papa—you must remember that we shall see each other very often.”

“The daughter goes away for ever, Rosamond, when she is married,” he answered sadly; “there is no bringing back the daughter, no implicit confidence placed or expected in the father. She comes back a woman strange to the parent, having secrets in her breast, which the father is never to know, having thoughts of pain or pleasure foreign to him, behind the white forehead on which he kisses her—both know there is a barrier between them, which no claim of birth can, or has even a right to overleap. You will live for your husband, not for your father—it is God’s law, why should I mourn more than other sires, who have given their daughters to suitors before me? But we shall see each other very often, and I do not think your love will quite fade away from me—eh, Rosy?”

“You know that it never will, papa.”

“Then we need not indulge in stage-partings,” said he gently untwining her arms, “you are too impetuous and sensitive, my child, I have said so more than once. Take a father’s advice, and sober down, Rosamond—a married woman should be slow of feeling, and not think life in perspective one great honeymoon.”

Rosamond took her last meal in Olverton House with her

father's darkling looks bent on her, and though she was going away with a heart running over with joy, yet the tears would float in her dim eyes—one cannot help feeling the pain of parting from home.

Early in the morning a travelling carriage came winding round the drive, and Stanmore stood at the window, watching it.

"It is coming, Rosamond," he muttered.

Rosamond flew to the second window, at the same moment as Arnold looked from the carriage. He waved his hand gaily to her, and she smiled and waved her hand in return, and the father in the deep recess of the other window groaned, and wondered if all daughters were so glad to leave the Great Shelter.

Avice sat at the breakfast table, dropping a few bright tears, and shading them from observation by her white hand—it was hard to lose her, too—how lonely the world was growing, and what a barren heath had followed the rich landscape of a few months since!

"Mr. Hern!"

Arnold entered, with a radiant face, and shook hands heartily with Mr. Stanmore and Avice, and imprinted a kiss on the upturned lips of his young wife, with all the fervour of a young bridegroom.

"I shall not be long, Arnold, dear," said Rosamond, "my travelling-dress is quite ready, and I shall only encumber you with one tiny box."

"The one in the hall—four men can't lift it, for a wager!" remarked Mr. Stanmore.

The effort at pleasantry failed—no one smiled, not even the author. It was the dimmest joke that had ever been uttered in Olverton House. Rosamond and Avice left the room, and Avice assisted her "sister" in her hurried preparations for departure; Rosamond all tears one instant, all smiles a second—regret tugging at one heart string, and the anticipation of life with Arnold playing a melodious tune upon another.

"I should go away much happier," said Rosamond, brushing away a shower of diamonds, "if you all looked happy, too—but father and you are sorrowful, and aunt is the only one that offers me congratulation."

"We wish you every joy, dear Rosamond."

"Yes, but with what dismal countenances, and I, I ought to—I am so happy—and I shall soon be back again, and we shall be running across to each other half-a-dozen times a day, having many verbal messages to deliver, and many things to arrange—oh! will not that be delightful?" she cried clapping her hands softly together, "and cannot I restrain my naughty Arnold's temper, and he so fond of me? to be sure—to be sure! What long walks we'll take, Arnold shall ramble with you and me, and tell us some of his stories—he's a capital story-teller, Avvy, although you must not listen too attentively, and flatter him in that manner, or I shall be very jealous."

Rosamond, equipped for departure, ran up stairs to her aunt, and Avice descended to the drawing room, and found Mr. Stanmore talking earnestly, and Arnold listening with flushed cheeks.

Mr. Stanmore ceased as Avice entered, and Arnold's face lighted up and lengthened again, when he saw she was unaccompanied by his bride.

Rosamond found her aunt still enjoying the luxury of rest, a coffee service at the side of the bed, and the skeleton waiting maid flitting about the room.

"Well, my dear aunt," said Rosamond, looking through the curtains, "I have come to say good-bye."

"Oh! dear, dear me—to say good-bye!" cried the lady, struggling into a sitting posture, and flinging her arms round her niece's neck, "so you are going, Rosamond—well, be a good girl, and a faithful wife, and love and honour, and all that. I wish you a pleasant journey, and Rosamond?"

"Yes, aunt."

"Do not forget your elevated position in society, my dear," said Miss Jane, gravely; "fail not to remember that you are the wife of a very rich man, who is heir to goodness knows how many thousands a year, and one of the finest estates in England. Ah! there was a time when you were nearly losing the chance of all the inheritance for—heigho, never mind, ugh, ugh!—reach me that phial, my dear, and have the goodness to pour me out a spoonful of that nasty sweet stuff inside it."

Miss Jane released her arms from Rosamond's neck, and suffered her to fulfil the request. After it had been com-

plied with, she put her arms as before and resumed her original position.

Some further advice, two kisses, one on either cheek, and Miss Jane propped herself with the pillows and lay back.

"I shall not stay away very long, aunt," said Rosamond. "Good-bye."

"Oh! good-bye, my dear."

"I shall see you in a month or two."

"That's very doubtful, Rosamond."

"Doubtful, aunt?"

"I do not get stronger, my dear, and this racking cough is wearing me out," said she; "but yet the doctor says I shall recover all my good looks in time, and that's comforting—so good-bye, my dear niece, we must hope for the best."

Rosamond stooped and bestowed another kiss on her aunt, before descending to the sitting room, wherein Arnold waited her presence so patiently and anxiously.

Husband and wife were side by side at last, and taking their farewells of the father and Avice.

It was hurriedly got over; they were soon in the travelling carriage, which, with a white handkerchief, and a white hand fluttering from the window, moved away with Rosamond, bearing her to her new life and its duties.

"I cannot feel as other fathers do," said Mr. Stanmore to Avice, as they stood in the hall watching the dark speck gliding along the distant road; "or I should not have experienced this pain," striking his breast, "this awful sinking, if she had married Clifton, or any young man whose character was, at least, up to the common standard of principle and forbearance. Heigho! I could almost lend my imagination to believe that I am watching a hearse in the distance."

"But you have a little faith in my cousin?" asked Avice.

"I am not fond of scandal—I have pertinaciously shunned the voice of idle talkers," said Stanmore; "and yet I have heard enough—unwillingly though it has been thrust upon me, from friends I have met from time to time on horseback in the lanes, or at the dinner tables of my neighbours—to terrify the most strong-minded match-maker in existence, much less the father who would have kept his daughter to himself. Avice, I thanked God only a week since that I had been firm enough to deny the consent to the marriage, even when

her giant passion seemed killing her with its fearful strength—only a week since, and she was married then! But close the door, girl, or we shall have the servants laughing at us.”

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER DEPARTURE FROM OLVERTON HOUSE.

How a familiar face is missed, though it bear no relation to us, or our interests. We miss our old servants who are discharged, or married, or dead—we miss even the strangers whom we have been accustomed to meet in our walks.

But when we come nearer home, and have to miss our fathers, mothers, children, and to know that empty chairs and half-finished work but represent them—to be certain that we shall see them no more—that some have gone for years, some beyond seas, more beyond the line that separates life from death—then we miss them in our hearts, and the void, though less perceptible after time has robbed it of its freshness, is yet never wholly filled up with the dust and rubbish of the present.

It was no wonder Mr. Stanmore missed his daughter, she was his only child, and now she had gone, he felt like a man standing alone upon a high hill—isolated from the world, with the keen cutting air of disappointment chilling his bones, and the hum of the myriads far beneath him and his thoughts. He was more lonely than he had even foreboded; and as the days stole on and week succeeded week, he assumed more of his old morbid, misanthropic manner. He kept to his study three-fourths of the long day, seldom riding out or leaving the house, becoming more chary of speech, and more sharp and crude in his observations than he had ever been—sparing not even in his sour tempers the underserving Avice.

At times, when he was more than usually despondent and bitter, Avice feared that there was something in addition to his daughter's loss which preyed upon his mind—his demeanour was so unnatural and strange.

Once Avice ventured a gentle remonstrance as an oppor-

tunity—very rare at that time—presented itself for a slight conversation between them.

He heard her patiently to the end, and said—

“You think I give way too much, Avice? give way to what? I flatter myself I am a strong-minded man and exhibit no feeling at all!”

“It is your very depth of feeling which proves your weakness,” said Avice.

“Miss Hern, I will come to school and learn of you,” he answered tartly; “prepare my lessons immediately, and write me precepts of heart-rending morality in my copy-books. Ah! if we only followed copy-book maxims, what good people we should be—what! going, Avice?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You think I am too big a boy to be taught,” he said, with an ironical laugh, “that’s true enough. Well, jesting apart, does it much matter if I go about the house as gloomy as Hamlet, and as ghost-like as his respectable father—who cares for me?”

“All.”

“Is it Rosamond, whose heart nearly danced out of her eyes when she left me for a husband? or Jane, up stairs, who sees me once or twice a week, and goes to sleep in her chair then?—or the servants who are paid to touch their hats—or the friends such as the Mistlefords, who conspire against my peace—or Avice Hern, whose next step will be to follow Rosamond’s example, to fall in love with an Adonis, a tea-party lion who can talk about the fashions—and go away singing like a nightingale?”

“At least Mr. Stanmore would not be much hurt at *that* occurrence,” remarked Avice, with a flash of spirit in her eyes.

“Have you not heard of a remarkable instance of force of habit in eels?” asked Stanmore after a pause, during which he had regarded her with a strange expression on his countenance.

Avice did not condescend to reply, but gathered her needlework in her arms, preparatory to a dignified retreat.

“So like the jolly fellow in the song,

‘I care for nobody, no, not I,
And nobody cares for me.’

That is the way to jog along smoothly, Avice,” continued he,

"I shall bear what is to come with that philosophical indifference ably exemplified in the great poet's lines. So when the tea-party lion—ahem !—well, anybody—say Mr. Clifton, fresh from London, and penitent as the prodigal son, comes home, and wins you over to forgetfulness with a new brooch, or a—"

Avice had never felt more angered in her life, than on that day ; and when it came to Edward, and he estimated her feelings by new brooches, it was quite time to leave the room, her lithe, graceful figure quivering with passion, and either go to her "study" and cry, or to Miss Jane Stanmore and be worried. She chose the latter course. She was too indignant to seek refuge in woman's weakness—and woman's strength, by the way, when tears are exercised with due discretion.

Miss Stanmore, though it was summer time, and the air was genial and mild, only exchanged her bed-chamber for the drawing room for a few hours every afternoon. Out of doors, whether in the carriage or round the garden, no moral persuasion could induce her. She was weak and despondent, and more fond of novels than ever, and always disappointed when the hero and heroine married comfortably in chapter the last—it was so unlike real life !

The doctor began to make regular calls, and to look grave as he descended the stairs after an interview with his patient, who would not listen to his instructions on any point whatsoever. Time would cure her cough, nothing else. "Sea air," indeed, at her time of life ! "Change !" pack of stuff !—"Occupation of mind !" pack of nonsense ! When the doctor became more firm, as she showed no signs of improvement, she became more obstinate.

"If I must die, I'll die at home," she cried, peevishly ; "so don't bother me, there's a good man. Avice, go on with the book. How beautifully horrible it's getting now, my dear, isn't it ?"

Avice added her remonstrance to the doctor's, for she began to have her own fears too ; but no result followed her intervention. Mr. Stanmore assumed his sternest manner and commanded her to acquiesce ; and his sister put him off with "she would consider of it, and leave it till to-morrow, Arthur, and don't frighten her so, don't."

She took to her bed, after a few more weeks' failing

strength and ploughing cough, and the doctor came down one day from his patient's bed-side, and told Mr. Stanmore and Avice that the constitution of his sister was fast breaking up, and that there was no hope of her recovery.

Mr. Stanmore's face lowered at the tidings, but he heard the medical gentleman throughout without giving any sign of emotion, and then walked slowly up stairs to his study.

Miss Jane Stanmore began to tire of everything but novels, and Avice's days were spent at her bed-side; and the grooms were cantering backwards and forwards between Olverton House and Branscombe, with piles of three volume compositions under their arms, or before them on the saddle.

One day Miss Jane's precarious state was, at the suggestion of the doctor and Mr. Stanmore, broken to her by Avice in her own gentle manner; and Miss Jane, with a sigh, gave up novels for life, and consented to the clergyman of Sanderstone (a venerable old gentleman, for whom years and years ago she had embroidered a couple of mitres on a pair of black velvet slippers)—spending an hour with her every afternoon.

"Avice, my dear," said Miss Stanmore one morning, "have you written to Rosamond?"

"Yes, aunt," replied Avice (she had, at Miss Stanmore's request, called her aunt since her illness). "I wrote to her three weeks since."

"Have you had an answer?"

"Not yet."

"Ah! I daresay the letter has miscarried," said Miss Stanmore, musingly. "Well, it does not matter much. Why should I break in upon her happiness. I used to spoil that often enough when I was well and strong. What a cross old toad I used to be, Avice, my dear!"

Avice shook her head.

"I was getting old, and never was a very mild creature," half soliloquised Miss Stanmore. "So it was quite excusable; besides, Avice, I had a disappointment early in life, just like you and Mr. Clifton."

Avice hung her head.

"He was—never mind," corrected she, "I do not care a straw now. It was all for the best; for he made a cruel husband to Miss Turnerbury of Richmond. She was never

without black eyes ; and although she always ascribed them to severe colds, poor thing ! we all knew better. I knew that I was marked out for an old maid ; and I think you are, my dear, if you will allow me to say so ; and it's wonderful how cross it makes a person at times. Not that I believe you will ever be particularly fractious, my child ; but it's as well to learn to govern ourselves when we are young. Avice, my dear ! ”

“ Yes, aunt. ”

“ Do you remember—ahem !—my side curls ? ”

Avice perfectly remembered them.

“ When you are my age, Avice, they may come in very nicely, ” said she. “ They are at the bottom of that drawer in a little green box, and you'll find the key on my bunch. I think the shade of the hair is almost as black as your own, my dear. ”

The old lady rambled on, talked a great deal about her days at Richmond and of her love passages and trials, until Avice expressed a fear lest she should exert herself too much.

“ Not a bit, my dear, ” cried Miss Stanmore, “ my cough don't interrupt me now—it's almost gone ; and really I feel much better ! I've half a mind to get up to receive the doctor and the clergyman. Avice, my dear, I have such a funny whim in my head. ”

“ What is that, Miss Stanmore ? ”

“ I should, ” with a ghastly simper, “ so like to see Wal—Mr. Hern before I—I—I die. That's a hard word, my child, though it's only one syllable. I certainly never remarked it before. Die ! three letters, and yet so very hard to say ! ”

She fell off into a dreamy doze ; and Avice watched all day, at the doctor's request, and did not leave the room when the rector came to pray with her, or when Mr. Stanmore was sitting opposite with his hard-lined face and haggard looks.

Miss Stanmore mentioned her wish to her brother concerning Walter Hern ; but he did not seem to understand her, and looked inquiringly across the bed at Avice.

In the grey evening, when Stanmore and Avice were still sitting by her bed-side, the opening of the door woke the old lady from another doze.

It was the maid-servant entering with the chamber lamp.

"Ah! well to be sure!" she exclaimed in a low voice, "who would have thought of you, too! Oh dear, dear me! put the pillow straight, Avice. This is kind—this—is—*very*—kind—of—you—Mr.—Her-r-r-rn!"

And with a smile of welcome to the visionary Walter, she shut her eyes and died.

END OF BOOK VI.

BOOK VII.

“And must we be divided? must we part?”

SHAKSPERE'S “RICHARD II.”

Act V. Scene I.

“What! canst thou leave me too?”

SOUTHERN'S “SAMUEL MARRIAGE.”

Act IV. Scene II.

CHAPTER I.

RUMOURS AND REVIEWS.

THE blinds are drawn up in Olverton House, and the maiden sister is taking her long sleep in Sanderstone churchyard. Four weeks have passed since Miss Stanmore died with her lover's name upon her lips. Those four weeks have added another wrinkle to the already-furrowed brow of Mr. Stanmore, who is more gloomy, bitter, and misanthropical—still more of a riddle since the death of his sister.

He has received a letter from Rosamond, it is written hurriedly, and is full of expressions of her great sorrow for the severe illness of her aunt—she prays the missive may find her better (she who was past prayer ere it was written,) and with some incoherency, attempts to explain how her desire to return and watch by the sick bed of Aunt Jane, is only prevented by the greater duty which keeps her to her husband's side—and how he, her dear Arnold, is dull and irritable, when she talks of home, and she remains for his sake. She sends her love to father, Avice, and the sleeper, and adds that her deep concern for Miss Stanmore's health alone casts a gloom upon her life—she is so very, very happy in her love. She alludes not in that letter to Arnold's strong objection to return home thus early in the honeymoon, or even to Arnold's decided negative to her entreaty; they, the father and "the sister," guess that well enough, knowing the affectionate nature of the one, and the selfish exaction of the other.

But she is "very, very happy;" and that is everything. Her return cannot stop the turning of the tide, or bring back to her little world the maiden aunt. The house of Olverton becomes less and less cheerful in appearance, the sternness of its head and ruler increases every day. What sorrow he has felt at losing his only sister, is known but to himself and the four walls of the study—he shares his regrets with no living being, and shuns the sympathy of Avice Hern, his ward.

Olverton House is a great desert to Avice now—she sees

but little of Mr. Stanmore—she is the last tie to him and his home, and that tie must be broken for her own name's sake, ruthlessly severed ere the weeks lengthen into months. A rumour in the village has already startled Avice to thoughts of action, and of great changes for the future. *He* does not dream of change, it has never suggested itself to his mind—he thinks all possible alteration has been made—what other can there be, now his daughter is married, and his sister is not of this life?

"I must go," is Avice's conviction. "I must not live beneath this roof alone with him—although I love him as a father—yes, a father ! Mine will be a pang of separation, the grief of parting ; he will feel nothing but a momentary shock of surprise. It seems as if all have tired of me, and I have lived long enough to forfeit others' love, to fall back in every friend's esteem. Well, well, I can be happy with my dear old Martha—there is affection never to be shipwrecked in that faithful heart. Oh ! for life over again," cries Avice, "life at the dark threshold of the government office—childhood dating back from Miss Wrickerton's—my fortune a fairy-bock, and a half-crown in the little money-box on the mantelpiece."

Poor Avice looking back, and regretting that fortunate turn of events which has made a lady of her ; she must feel bitterly the dearth of affection, the wild sense of loneliness, to wish for the past life in the gloomy government office—to drown for ever in the Lethean stream her guardian, her "sister" Rosamond—all the recollections of her first love, and of him who won her maiden heart with a mask upon his face ! Mr. Stanmore affords Avice no opportunity to reveal the intentions she has formed—he will never be alone with her—he rises immediately after the servants have removed the cloth, and walks moodily to the study.

Once Avice stops him, and says with a faltering voice :

"Mr. Stanmore, can I speak a few words with you ?"

"I am very busy to-day, Avice," he replies, without raising his eyes to meet her own ; "to-morrow."

"But it is important that I should."

"Important to you, child," he says, "but is it to me ?"

"I do not know—I—I hope so."

"Ah ! you do not know," answers Stanmore, "it cannot be of very great importance, then—and I would not be

threatened by petty complaints about housekeeping or the servants."

"It relates to neither, Sir," says Avice.

"Well, then, tell it me to-morrow."

On the morrow he leaves Olverton House for a few days, and Avice has not the courage or the heart to abandon the place till his return ; it would be ungenerous, undutiful, and cruel.

But each day adds to the delicacy of her position, and brings something keen to wound her. The busy rumour begins to circulate;—how, or in what manner it first originated, is as mysterious as the origin of every rumour, which upsets a home, or excites a nation;—all the village knows that Avice Hern is engaged to the widower, Mr Stanmore ! It rings in the ears of Avice again and again, and sends the blood mounting to her face. It is the more painful from its very inconsistency—from the absurdity of her guardian's name being coupled with her own. It is Katie Millthorn who tells Avice once more about the world of Sanderstone, and the leading topic it has made of her and her guardian.

"A blithe good-morning to you," says the handsome girl, as she comes face to face with Avice in the green lane, "but the sunshine sets ill on the black dress. You are pale, Miss."

"I am not very well, Katie," answers Avice.

"We shall have the great people back soon, I suppose, Miss," said Katie, "the young squire and his new wife ?"

"They will soon return home, I have no doubt."

"They'll be a brave couple," muses Katie, "heigho ! I wonder whether I shall ever be married. Father says that I want a little more sense for a working-man's wife, and have got a little too much for a gentleman's."

"Your father is a satirist," with a sad smile.

"In his way he is, perhaps, although I don't exactly know what a satirist may happen to be," says Katie, "but this I know," and she gives a sly glance at Avice from her fine hazel eyes.

"What do you know, Katie ?" inquires Avice, her face flushing.

"That there will be plenty of marriages at Sanderstone

church, without Katie Millthorn's," replies the girl, "there's Miss Mistleford engaged to a baronet, and there's Miss Hern, they say, will be Mrs. Stanmore the second, blessings on her married life, say I."

"Pray who told you that, Katie?" asks Avice, with forced calmness.

"Who?—why, it's hard to say Miss, but they all seem to know it well enough," answers Katie; "hope I've given no offence lady?"

"No, no—but you are—they are very wrong, it is all a wicked falsehood which no one can believe."

And with this sudden burst of indignation, Avice leaves Katie Millthorn standing in the country road, and looking after her with a vacant stare.

Mr. Stanmore returns not home, although Avice waits his coming, and has made the first step in her resolution by packing away many little things, with trembling hands and tearful eyes. It is to be done, let it be done at once—people must not say she is laying plans for the entrapping of the rich widower, now his daughter is married and his sister is dead. Let her keep her name pure at least, and let no unworthy motive be ascribed to her—proud little Avice—even by the meanest hind who lurks about the door of the Sanderstone inn.

A few days after the meeting with Katie, Mrs. Clifton makes an afternoon call at Olverton House, and comes sailing into the parlour, puts a blue and yellow covered book on the table, and then holds out her hands to Avice, and kisses her in her old motherly way.

Mrs. Clifton keeps up the acquaintance of Mr. Stanmore and Avice, and studiously avoids—prudent woman—all recurrence to the past. She is very lonely at the Shrubbery, and misses her dear Edward, and has once or twice a week a fit of the horrors, becoming full of fancies about his health, his aired sheets, his temptations in London, but for all this Edward must not come back yet—he may see Avice once more, and there may come a reconciliation—it takes so little to reconcile hearts that have once beat for each other.

Has Avice then erased from the pages of her heart the name of Edward Clifton? have time and absence, following up the keen stroke of the blade which laid low the temple,

and uprooted its flowers, brought balm to the wound, and dropped the veil over sorrow at last and for ever?

It seems so, for Avice can meet Mrs. Clifton with a serene countenance, and return the steady searching glance with one as unwavering and deep, and ask after Mr. Clifton with a voice that has not a lurking tremor in its tone.

Mrs. Clifton tries to sound Avice on this morning in particular, makes delicate hints concerning Mr. Stanmore, and asks where he is with one of those looks already described, and of which Avice instinctively guesses the purport, and feels the blood tingling to her finger ends in consequence.

She answers quietly and proudly, and then tells Mrs. Clifton of her intention to leave Olverton House, speaking of Mr. Stanmore as her second father, and of the daughter's love she has for him—nothing more, or deeper than a daughter's love, the old lady is convinced. Edward had better keep away a few months longer, that is quite certain, thinks the duchess; he has very funny notions of honour, and might again press the subject, nay, probably would, if Avice was only in the way. But Avice is going to leave Olverton House, and very proper of her too—she will not live at the Hall, that is pretty certain; she will go a long distance off—perhaps to that funny old lady in the alms-house, whom Avice talks about sometimes—perhaps to Miss Wrickerton who still writes occasionally, and who is yet living at the back of Parliament Street, Westminster—at all events not in or near Sanderstone.

The duchess changes the subject to the great relief of Avice, and talks about village affairs, and the neighbours, and Miss Mistleford's great match in an apathetic tone, that conveys but small impressions of her interest, sitting back at the same time in her chair, and fidgeting with the blue and yellow book she has taken up from the table, opening and shutting the volume—looking askance at it, and mildly coughing over it. The secret of this mysterious behaviour oozes out at last. There is a proud light in her eyes, as she crosses her fat white hands upon the book in her lap and says—

“My dear Avice, I cannot resist telling you a secret, I am enjoined not—but you—you know a mother's feelings, and

will be glad to hear of the success of a friend, I am sure you will. It is a happy day for me—a happy day for Edward! My dear boy has written a poem, and such a grand poem, and it has been reviewed in the ‘Edinburgh’—this is the ‘Edinburgh,’” clasping it to her breast, “and it speaks well of my boy—my darling clever boy.”

“I am glad to hear of the success of Mr. Clifton.”

“I said that he was clever—I always thought so, and so did he, Avice, but that’s neither here nor there,” she cries. “And here’s the ‘Review,’ and his fortune’s made, and you must not breathe a syllable to any living soul, and, oh dear! to think Edward will be a great man, and write poetry like Lord Byron.”

Avice congratulates Mrs. Clifton on the promising début of her son, and the fair fame he is winning for himself in the literary world.

“I will leave you the ‘Review,’ my dear, you may have some curiosity to peruse it,” says Mrs. Clifton, “it is a splendidly written article, and so just! And yet they say critics are jealous or partial—I don’t believe a word of it.”

Mrs. Clifton takes her departure in a perfect flutter of delight, enjoining for the second time a stern secrecy on the part of Avice, with reference to the new poet who in her vain belief is to become the centre of the system, and all the authors from Shakspeare downwards merely satellites revolving round him. She has a second motive in leaving the “Edinburgh” with Avice, it will show her son’s old love how much superior he is to the Clifton of time past, and how immeasurably above her now! Mrs. Clifton returns home in the best of spirits—*confidentially* breaks the secret to the friends whom she meets upon her way, and is the proudest and happiest of mothers, with a weak mind, and a lax tongue—yet the mother of a genius.

When Mrs. Clifton has gone, Avice sits wistfully regarding the quarterly journal, with her hands clasped together, and her bosom heaving.

After some minutes’ reverie, she rises, takes up the book, and then seats herself in the great window recess to catch the full light of the afternoon sun.

She begins to read—it is a long review, and after a time there is a swimming of the letters, a shaking of the book—

it must be the fault of type and the weakness of the stitching—her eyes and hands are steady enough—to be sure they are.

But presently, there comes a long, quivering sigh—then another—then the book falls to the floor, and the small, well-shaped hands, true to the habit of old, spread themselves over her agitated face.

Has the love not died out beneath the shock then, after all that is past and lost?—are there still some green fibres clinging round the fond heart for all the unworthiness of him who has ascended Parnassus?—or is it but the memory of what has been—but a few stray thoughts which have risen from the deep deep well wherein love is for ever sunk and drowned? Does she think—it is natural—of the proud day this would have been for her too, if all had not happened as it did—if they were still engaged, or married?—ah! married!

“Avice, what is the matter?”

Avice feels her hands slowly drawn with a strange tenderness from her face, and starts on perceiving her guardian standing over her, and regarding her attentively.

“You have been crying—what is it?”

“Nothing—oh! it is nothing, Sir,” she answers. “I felt rather dull and lonely—you have returned at last?”

“Yes.”

He drops her hands, and the old, moody look settles on his features.

“What is that?” he asks, pointing to the magazine at her feet.

“That is the ‘Edinburgh Review.’”

“Hardly a ladies’ book, Avice—are you a subscriber to it?”

“Mrs. Clifton lent it to me,” Avice replies.

“Mrs. Clifton!” echoes Stanmore; “is there reading fit for Mrs. Clifton here?”

He stoops and picks up the book. After carelessly turning over the leaves, he stops at a certain place, and says,

“Poets—poets! plentiful as blackberries and half of them about as valuable. Does our Giant of the North crush this butterfly on the wheel?”

He takes the seat facing Avice, and begins to read. Suddenly he closes the book at the third page, and tosses the "Review" to its former place on the floor.

"That will do—I have read enough of that; critiques are not in my vein. I leave the continuation to one more interested than I."

As he glances at Avice, she fancies that she detects a slight curling of the lip.

"Avice, I have been to London," he says, rising from his seat.

"Indeed, Sir."

"Yes, and I am half tempted to begin government business once more—but more of this anon. Miss Hern," he adds, with no slight contraction of the brow, "I met a friend of yours in London."

"A friend of mine, Sir?"

"Yes, a Mr. Clifton—do you know him?"

Avice replies not to so unnecessary a question.

"The great man—the new-born poet whom that book reviews," says he; "he told me of his secret—that was kind of him, eh, Avice?—of the success he has made, and of the third edition of his high-flown platitudes. His mother has forestalled him in Sanderstone, at least."

"You—you know, then?" begins Avice.

"Ah! too much—more than I wish or am glad of," he answers, with a hand upon the door. "I leave you to the 'Edinburgh,' Avice—it will amuse you—the reviews! I fear that I have been intruding on pleasant thoughts and pleasant reading; still, let me warn you as an old friend and your guardian, such reading from the heart may be injurious to Avice Hern."

He leaves the room, and a moment afterwards the noisy lock of the study door is heard to turn.

"Never sparing me from cruel comment when the chance is open to invidious allusion," murmurs Avice, with two rebellious tears in her dark eyes. "In what have I offended, or what change in me has forfeited that esteem which once I shared with his own daughter? Ah! what a life of wrongs—wrongs of the world within a world—the inner self, of which the outer world knows nothing—must I bear uncomplainingly!"

A second thought strikes her, for she turns pale and

holds her breath—then crimson and hangs down her head.

“No, no, better anything than that!—better this world of mine, all sorrow!”

And in the deeper reverie that second thought calls up, she forgets Edward Clifton’s success in that outer world of which she had more than a child’s knowledge and experience when a little girl, and keeping house for “father,” and of which she has much less knowledge now the lesson requires to be learned, and she is going forth in the early days of her womanhood with the great task before her. But going forth with a brave heart still from the grand home that has so long sheltered the Wildflower!

CHAPTER II.

A DIALOGUE.

“Avice, how should you like to leave Sanderstone?”

It was the morning following the return of Mr. Stanmore. The breakfast table had been cleared, the servants had retired, and the guardian and ward were seated facing each other. Mr. Stanmore had made no hasty movement to withdraw, in conformity with the new rules he had adopted, but sat in his easy chair, and looked at Avice Hern.

Avice felt that the hour had come for explanation—felt how cruel it would be to the feelings of them both, and was puzzling her brain with the best way to commence a subject so embarrassing, when her guardian forestalled her by his singular question.

Before Avice could reply, he had continued—

“To leave Sanderstone, all its fair landscapes and agreeable neighbours, and live in dry, musty London, with nothing but dreary streets and tops of houses for scenery?”

“Have you any serious intention of leaving Sanderstone, Mr. Stanmore?”

“What inducement is there to live in it?” he answered, his grave face becoming graver still. “I shall see but little of Rosamond, if I remain, and shall have fewer quarrels with my son-in-law, if I meet him only once or twice a year. Besides,

there is another reason—I have lost a sister in this house. I am not old-fashioned enough to be influenced by any superstitious folly, but I have a kind of horror of living in a place wherein everything it contains is suggestive of a painful remembrance of the one gone. I have another reason, yet.”

“And that is—?” asked Avice.

“That I begin after many years of quiet country life, to find that I am yet too young to give up work altogether—I feel a void that ‘The State’ can never fill—an aching want to be busy again, and meddle with politics, or office business, and I have had two offers made me, one or another of which I feel very much inclined to accept.”

Avice was silent—she was framing her disclosure too.

“So, Avice, I think of leaving Olverton House,” he said, “come, what do you say to London, and why are you still thoughtful, girl?”

“Mr. Stanmore, will you listen to me?”

“Your question implies a doubt.”

“Listen without comment until I have concluded all that I have to say—listen patiently, and with forbearance.”

“Am I so great a tyrant?”

“You have altered very much—to me.”

“I have altered very much to myself, Avice,” he said gloomily. “I have lost so many stakes, that I feel like a ruined spendthrift, without a single hope in the world—I have been two speculative! Proceed, I will listen *patiently*.”

“Mr. Stanmore,” began Avice, looking down, “it has probably not suggested itself to you that I—I am alone here, that the great changes which have come upon us in this house have placed me in a position which becomes every day a greater effort to sustain. I will not tell you, my dear, dear guardian, all the foolish, wicked reports—reports which no one of sane mind would give credence to—that are already floating about Sanderstone. I will not wound you by recurrence to them—they are wild, foolish, and void of all belief, inconsistent in their nature, and yet to me so cruel! But as my staying beneath this roof would, and *does*, give some colour to the story—I think it right and maidenly to inform you of that painful duty which I must perform for your sake and my own. It is,” drawing a long breath, “to part.”

“Is that a painful duty, Avice?” he asked, with his troubled gaze directed at the carpet.

"Ah! dear guardian, kind father, if you will allow me thus to call you for the few more hours I stay beneath this roof," said Avice, tremblingly, "have I been so hard of feeling, so devoid of common love and gratitude from the day you sheltered the grandchild of the poor office-keeper, that you should doubt the pain I feel in telling you—the pain I feel in saying I must leave you?"

"No, no, I will believe all this is painful to relate—yet—yet you *will* leave me! Wife, daughter, sister, and now you!" he said in a low stifled tone.

"In the new engagements you will form in London, in your new pursuits and studies, you will soon become habituated to my absence," said Avice, "and, remember, guardian—"

"Go on," said he, looking up for a moment as she abruptly stopped.

"It is nothing."

"Still say it, lest I should think it of moment."

"It may pain you."

"No."

"I was about to add—forgive me they are idle words—that I do not think this change will be felt very much by you; we have seen but little of each other lately—you have been busy with your papers in the study, or absent from your home, or writing, or occupied with books. I am glad of that—I would not have you feel my loss for all the world."

"Have you forgotten that I am your guardian, and that I can command your stay, Miss Hern?" he asked, with a sudden asperity of manner.

"Ah! for my sake you would not do that, Mr. Stanmore," said Avice.

"Right—right," he answered, sinking into his hollow tone of voice again, "it is your wish—I have but to comply. What do you intend?—what pursuit?—what plan?"

"I have formed no settled plan," replied Avice; "I thought that if—if you knew of any lady who travelled much, or who lived alone, I should like to be a companion to her—to travel with her—to—"

"Descend from the lady and become half a domestic and half a slave, subjecting yourself to the airs and caprices of a lady of fortune, who will call you her companion," cried Stanmore. "Avice, you are humble."

Avice coloured.

"If you will go, I dare not balk you," said Stanmore, "it is rash and precipitate, but I will think of this. In a day or two I may suggest something more fitting for a daughter. Why, there is your uncle—live with Rosamond!"

"No, no."

"And now," asked he almost fiercely, "this world which you are studying almost prudishly—this giving ear to idle rumours, instead of treating it with merited contempt, and looking back its calumny with scorn! Do you fear the world's whisperings so much that you leave your home—sunder all old connections—go forth to face the troubles of life, and subject yourself to its petty indignities, for a few foolish words that have been said against you? Oh! Avice, I did not think you were so weak as that!"

"It is my strength which makes me answer those evil reports, and prove their falsity in the only way I can."

"Tush—tush," said Stanmore impatiently. "What answer is that? Is there no other story to be made up, or has the world but one? Come, let us be plain," added he with a great effort, "this guardian and ward, this man old enough to be her father, this girl so young and artless, what does the world say about them—does it say they are going to be—married?"

"The rumour goes so far in its absurdity. Those who have promulgated it do not reflect upon the years we have been together—the disparity between our ages and pursuits—the child I am even now," said Avice, "more—they would ascribe this unnatural engagement to my scheming, my duplicity—my, my—"

She broke down at last, despite the struggle with her choking voice to continue. He held up his hand and said—

"No more, I have been harsh; I ask your pardon. Yes, yes! I can well understand your feelings—the delicacy of your position in this house—I see it all—you must go! No one must say a word against my ward. Adopt your own course, Avice, but let me point out, to the best of my power, its direction. I will think of this deeply—don't move—stay here. I am going to my room, or out, or—don't move!"

He rose from his chair and left the room with rapid strides.

Avice saw no more of him that day; he kept to his study

till near dinner time, and then went out on horseback, and did not return until a late hour of the night.

At breakfast the next morning he made no further comment on the incidents of the preceding day, but his manner, which had undergone many changes in her time, was now wholly different from any mood that he had hitherto assumed. There was a nervous agitation in all he did and said, that was in singular contrast to his old inflexibility, and the few words he addressed to Avice were uttered in a low kind tone, which reminded her of a very old time indeed—the time when she was lying ill at his house in Richmond, and he used to look in at the door of her room every morning before he went to office.

Was it prudery after all, thought Avice—was it not wilfully throwing aside her position in life, and wounding him who should have been her first consideration, to leave his house—her home? Had not girls younger than she lived with their widowed guardians, without one breath of suspicion falling on them?—Suspicion! she was above it. Yet they were talking of her outside, even Mrs. Clifton half believed it, and Miss Mistleford had already whispered it to the real baronet, to whom she was engaged. She must go—he had seen the force of the truth himself, and had confessed it in his parting words of yesterday. He would soon forget her too, she felt assured of that; although he was kind and gentle now, yet he *had* shunned her society, confined himself to his own rooms, and almost lived without seeing her from day to day. She should think of him a great deal—she loved him better, perhaps, than any one living in the world; oh! if she had only been his daughter! But he had had enough of daughters—he had said so on the day she endeavoured to soften the shock of Rosamond's secret marriage, by offering him a daughter's love. Besides, they were not going to part for ever, they were too old friends for that—he would come and see her in her new home, wherever that might be, and those would be happy days of meeting, when he came to prove that he had not quite forgotten her.

She sat and thought about all this, and more than this, long after Mr. Stanmore had left her to her reverie—she thought too of spending the rest of the summer with Martha Badge, of living with her in that alms-house, and living happily too, for a month or two, until she had finally decided

upon her new course in life, or Mr. Stanmore had offered his advice or found a friend for her.

How pleased Mrs. Badge would be to see her, how surprised to learn that she had come to spend so long a time under her humble roof; what walks they would take together—what stories they would have to tell, and to recall—why, it would be beginning life again!

Setting aside that stale proverb applicable to an elderly gentleman of loose character, it is occasionally a matter of surprise to find how often a train of thoughts appears to conjure up, as if by magic, the object of reflection or something appertaining to it—a friend, a letter, or a message sent by lightning on the wires.

Could there have been a more curious coincidence than this? Avice Hern startled out of her meditations by the opening of the door—by the servant entering and standing aside to allow the ingress of a tall old lady—by his announcing in stentorian tones the name of “Mrs. Badge!”

CHAPTER III.

OLD FRIENDS.

“My dear, dear Martha, is it indeed you?”

Yes, it was indeed honest Martha Badge, there was no mistaking the old lady. There was not another Martha Badge in England.

Not a bit shaken in constitution, with only her hair more white, and her eyes more dim behind the awful spectacles; still as upright and firm as a backboard, and showing no signs of giving in for many years to come—looking as if she was well seasoned against Time, and proof against all those attacks of his which had laid legions in the dust of their mother earth, long before they had scored as many points as Martha in the great game of life.

“Yes, it's *me*,” replied Martha, as Avice flew into her arms, “and a rare fright I've given you, like an old silly, as I am. Why you're as pale as a ghost, dear. Now you didn't expect me to-day, Avvy, my child, did you?”

“Why did you not write and tell me you were coming?”

said Avice, half reproachfully, when Mrs. Badge and she were seated together on the couch, "you who have resisted so many invitations to Olverton House, and talked of never leaving your cottage, and of being settled there for ever."

"Ah! we're all talking of things we know nothing about in this world," said Martha, sententiously.

"I—I hope nothing has happened," asked Avice, alarmed at the mysterious manner of Mrs. Badge.

"Something has happened, my dear," replied Mrs. Badge, "and a very singular affair it is, altogether. I've only come a few minutes before her, in order to surprise you a bit Avice."

"Her!" Avice repeated, wonderingly.

"Yes, my dear, 'her,'" replied Martha, "Miss Wrick-ick-erton—I haven't the name quite right yet, Avvy,—but your old guv'nness, you know."

"Miss Wrickerton—is she really coming to see me?"

"Ah! in a carriage with two horses, my dear Avvy," cried the old lady, "no more of your Bath chairs full of hard corners, and—fleas. Miss Wrick-ick-erton has come into her Rights after all these years—you remember they were talked about at school? the affair is all settled, the big people in Chancery have found time to bring it to an end, and she's a lady now, and deserves to be, my dear, if ever anybody did."

"I am very glad to hear of her prosperity."

"To think, my child, that she should remember me, and take the trouble to write such a long letter too—oh! I never saw or heard such a long letter in all my life—awfully long, my dear—saying she was more lonely than ever since she had got a great lady and given up school, and lost her mother last winter, and that nothing would please her better than for an old friend to live with her—think of that, Avice! She hated finery, she said, had quarrelled with all her relations long ago, kept no company, and knew she should only be at home with that chatty steady old lady who used to take tea with her and her pet—tea and cake if you remember, Avice, at her house in Westminster. Ah! she's what I call a sensible woman."

"And how long have you been her companion, dear Martha?"

"Two days, and we're quite comfortable already," answered

Mrs. Badge, "and as she had made up her mind to surprise you by a visit,—for you do write to her she tells me, Avvy, and have not forgotten her—she waited till I could join her, and so we came to Bankscum yesterday morning—came over to San—San—this place you know, late last night—hired a cottage for a week, and a stable at 'the Bear,' for the carriage and horses, which she brought down with her from London—such a carriage and horses, my dear! and I've just walked over here myself to tell you she is coming, and to see that good young man, Mr. Sternbore, and thank him for all past kindnesses to me, and, if you will allow me—to Avice. I hope he's as good as ever, Avice?"

"Yes," replied Avice, "but he has seen sorrow since he was secretary at the—office, Martha,—you would scarcely know him, now."

"Know him anywhere, my dear."

Martha Badge's firm asseveration was not borne out by any decisive proof, for upon Mr. Stanmore's entrance, she sat and stared sternly at him through her spectacles, and nudged Avice for information concerning the intruder.

"This is my guardian, Martha. Mr. Stanmore," turning to him, "this is my oldest friend—my second mother—Mrs. Badge."

Mrs. Badge rather staggered at the introduction, leaped from her seat and made a stiff formal curtsey. Mr. Stanmore would have remembered her anywhere by that painful 'bend in the back, he used to be struck and appalled by it in the office days, when meeting her on the stairs, or in the hall, and had always been in inward dread of her doing herself some material injury.

"Welcome, my dear lady," said he kindly, "pray keep your seat, I am glad to see you looking well—be seated, pray. Well, Mrs. Badge, have you come to spend a week with our little friend here?"

"No thank'ee, Sir, I have merely called to see Avice—to tell her of her old guv'nness, who is on her way to see her too; she's come into her rights, Sir."

"Oh! indeed," replied Mr. Stanmore, absently.

"I've also called to give an old woman's thanks, Sir, for that shelter you afforded me down in Essex, with your own free heart."

"Tut—tut,"

"And to tell you, Sir, the key is left with Mrs. Twitter, and—"

"Yes, yes," said he, somewhat impatiently, "I understand, but you—have you left the place?"

"To take pity on the loneliness of Miss Wrick—Wrick—erton, Sir, an old friend, who, thank God, has come into her rights. Hard and cruel was it to keep her out of 'em so long!"

"Avice?"

Mr. Stanmore gave an earnest, inquiring look, and made an imploring gesture with his hands. It was so quickly and suddenly done, that it escaped the notice of Mrs. Badge. Avice sadly shook her head. Martha Badge was an honest, good woman, and Avice could have lived a life-time with her without feeling any great distinction, without paying any heed to her rough, illiterate ways, her old-fashioned manners, her want of education, good breeding, everything that makes the gentlewoman; but Mr. Stanmore—a man of sensitive temperament, a scholar, one who had had ladies for mother, sister, daughter—Martha Badge was no companion for him, not even as a housekeeper, and Avice felt that he must have had a deep affection for his ward, for all his avoidance of her company, to make the offer he had just silently implied.

Mr. Stanmore turned away, and after a few casual observations quitted the room, almost at the same time as Miss Wrickerton's carriage was drawn up before the portico of Olverton House, and Miss Wrickerton was being assisted from it by a sturdy page, in such a bright blue tight-fitting jacket, and such white shiny buttons, with the crest—part of the rights—on each, that he looked like a policeman.

Leaning heavily on the arm of this page, who was also burdened with a large pillow, Miss Wrickerton was with some difficulty got into the hall, and escorted slowly into the parlour.

When the *ci-devant* schoolmistress was fairly in the room, and seated in a large easy chair with the pillow at her back—the official-looking page backed himself out, and shut the door upon the fair triumvirate.

"My dear, dear Avice," cried Miss Wrickerton, tears beginning to run down her sharp little face, as her old pupil leaned over her and kissed her, "how glad I am to see you—to

hold you in these weak arms of mine, just as I did, goodness knows how many years ago ! It's just like a dream—it's just like a dream ! ” she cried, hysterically. “ I used to say to myself, I'll never go and see my favourite—you were always my favourite, the only one I ever had—until I have come into my rights. And here they are, and here I am—oh ! this is a very happy day.”

And to prove the asserted fact, she began to cry more violently, and to bury her seamed face in her laced handkerchief.

“ It is a happy day for me, dear Miss Wrickerton, to find that I am still the favourite, that you have not forgotten me—you who have had much to think of, without troubling yourself about your little Avice, much affliction, and many cares ! ”

“ And so few to love me,” added Miss Wrickerton, drying her eyes, “ and you were such a lovable child, if you remember, Avice ? ”

Avice did not remember, although Mrs. Badge chimed in with a sonorous, “ That she was ! ”

“ And then, how kind it was to come and see me after they had resolved to make a lady of you—do you remember coming in the carriage, Avice ? and to never forget me in my poor little back street, but to write the kindest of letters from time to time, and tell me all the news of your good home. Not forgotten !—ah ! my dear child, kindness and attention are never forgotten by old ladies and old maids, and will make an impression on the frostiest hearts of either. And mine has been a very frosty heart, indeed ! ”

“ That it hasn't,” was suddenly jerked out by Martha Badge.

“ My dear Mrs. Badge, it has, I assure you,” said Miss Wrickerton, “ frosty, and hard and cold—but then I've been a poor sufferer in my time.”

“ And how happy it makes me, dear Miss Wrickerton, to be able to congratulate you on your change of fortune and your deserved prosperity—to thank you also for this kind, kind visit.”

“ No thanks, my dear,” replied Miss Wrickerton, gently tapping the elbow of her chair with a long fan, as she used to tap the ink-stained desk with her ebony ruler, “ I look upon it as a duty. And as for change of fortune—upon my

word, Avice, since I have found myself a rich lady, I have not been half as happy. No, no, all the money bags in the world would not do me much good. There's my poor mother, I have lost her—she died, dear soul ! last winter, in the old house, two days before the great letter came to me with its flaring red seal ; died,” beginning to whimper again, “believing I should have to sell some of the furniture, and let another room to pay the doctor who attended her. Then when I got into my fine house—it's in the heart of London, for I think I should go mad if I lived in a country place now—it was all so lonely and miserable, I missed my rows of children—there was no one to teach—no backs to slap when I was cross—nothing but gawky servants staring at you out of the corners of their eyes. So I wrote to my good friend Mrs. Badge, and I have been getting better ever since she arrived ; there's only one thing now to make me well and comfortable.”

“And that?”

“Is,” with a wistful glance, “Miss Avice Hern in London, spending a few quiet weeks with me. I hope you will not refuse me, my dear, after coming all this long way to fetch you. I hope Mr. Stanmore will spare you, for the sake of the old companions we have been together.”

Mr. Stanmore re-entered, and was introduced to Miss Wrickerton, who coughed, even blushed, and was very much perplexed. His gentlemanly quiet manner soon set her at her ease.

“I have taken the liberty of sending your carriage home, Miss Wrickerton,” said he.

“My gracious, Sir !” cried the small lady, “you never have ?”

“My ward will not feel inclined to part with her best friends yet awhile,” he continued, “the carriage will come in the evening, after dinner. There, there, my dear ladies, it's finally arranged, you cannot get away again without my sign manual, and I am not disposed to give it.”

“Oh, Sir ! you're very kind,” simpered Miss Wrickerton.

“Ah ! Avice will tell you a different tale,” said he, with a laugh ; “but I am intruding on your stories of old times, and hindering all the outbursts of confidence—pardon me.”

He once more closed the door, and went up to his study.

"What a perfect gentleman! what a nice dear man!" cried Miss Wrickerton in an ecstasy of pleasure.

"Gentleman—what could he be else, I should like to know?" asked Mrs. Badge, gruffly.

"And what a flow of spirits!" added Miss Wrickerton. "I declare I'm quite in love with him—I hope he did not see it!"

They had a long talk together after Mr. Stanmore had retired, one of those long happy conversations between old friends, who have been parted for years; full of "do you remembers," and "do you recollects,"—charmed words which make all of us young again, and take us back to the days of our youth, of our first love, or our first ambition—days of the satchel, and of that "shining morning face" with which we crept "unwillingly to school."

It was a pleasant day altogether, and Avice did not mar it by any recapitulation of her own sorrows, or her own resolutions for the future—contenting herself with accepting Miss Wrickerton's invitation, and perhaps thinking that it might be extended much longer than Miss Wrickerton had any idea of at present.

Mr. Stanmore thought so, too, when Miss Wrickerton told him at dinner of her wish, and asked his consent to ratify it, and his face shadowed very darkly as he inclined his head, and said, "what pleased Miss Hern, was more than satisfactory to him."

The carriage came at last, and Miss Wrickerton was assisted into the hall by the united aid of Mr. Stanmore and Avice. Mr. Stanmore was still talking to the delighted and highly-flattered schoolmistress, and expressing a hope that Sanderstone was not to lose her for many weeks to come, when there came rudely clattering on the pavement a spirited horse, whose rider was not scrupulous in muttering a few curses on the carriage in the way, against which his mare had nearly run her "infernally stupid head." The man leaped from his horse and stalked into the hall, riding-whip in hand.

"Where's Stanmore—where's Stanmore?" cried Walter Hern. "I want—oh! here you are; good news, old fellow, the turtle doves are coming home next Monday."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mr. Stanmore, "when did you hear that?"

"Telegraph from London—good-evening, Ma'am—they're in London now."

"They did not send to me," muttered Mr. Stanmore.

"To tell you the truth, Arnold telegraphed for money, and—ho ! ho ! ho !—there's not much credit in the preference," said he, "but still I thought I'd run over and tell you, although I've left a dozen capital fellows at home—will you join us ?"

"No, thank you."

"They did not like me to leave them," said Hern, with a tipsy hiccup ; "but I was certain you'd be glad to hear."

"I am obliged, Hern, by your consideration."

"Well, Avice, old girl," cried Hern, "you don't trouble your uncle much ; but we shall get you at the Hall a little oftener when Rosamond comes home, and—hollo !" with a terrific shout of surprise, as he caught sight of the grim face peering over Avice's shoulder, "is it ?—yes—by all that's holy—Mother Badge !"

Mrs. Badge stood with her hands clutching Avice's dress, but did not speak.

"You're bearing up against time, old gal," said he, "the devil's in me, if I thought of ever seeing you again !"

Still Mrs. Badge did not utter one syllable in exchange, although the gleam of defiance was shining in her cold grey eyes. Walter Hern's lips parted to again address her, but the old lady leaving Avice's side, marched slowly back into the room.

"That's better than bullying, eh, Avice," said Hern, "better than the row we had in Whitehall one day—poor old gal ! how she did go it that night, to be sure !"

During this colloquy, Miss Wrickerton had been safely got into her carriage by the amateur policeman, who had relieved the careful Mr. Stanmore of his charge. Avice hastened to see after honest Martha ; she found the old lady seated on the sofa, and breathing hard, as though she had been running.

"My dear, dear Martha, what is the matter ? I hope his sudden appearance has not frightened you," cried Avice. "I never told you of his living at Sanderstone, or of his change in life, knowing your antipathy so well."

"I shall be better in a minute—oh, dear !"

Avice poured out a glass of wine.

"Thank you—I shall be quite well now, my child," said Mrs. Badge, making one spasmodic gulp of the wine, "to think of seeing him."

"How long has he been living about here?" inquired Martha, after a long pause.

"Some years, now."

"Years!"

"Yes."

"What is he—a gentleman's servant—a groom, or what?"

"A man possessed of extensive property, inherited from the brother who died in India—the Richard Hern you told me of one day."

"So Richard Hern made money, and this one—the last of a bad bunch, and the worst of all of 'em," said Martha, "has become a rich man! Do you love him, Avvy, now?"

"We see not each other very often," answered Avice, "and—and there is not much to love or respect in Walter Hern, Martha."

"How weak and feeble I am growing Avice," said she, rising, "quite childish—quite a babby. If he had not taken me so sudden-like, how I would have given it him! Miss Wrickerton will wonder where I am. We shall see you to-morrow, my darling, and—who's Arnold?"

"His son."

"The son of Walter Hern!" cried Martha Badge, "has he a son then?"

"Yes, and married to Mr. Stanmore's daughter."

"Oh, dear! if I ask any more questions to-night," said Martha, "I shall go into a fit. Married Mr. Stanmore's daughter! married Mr.—good-night, my dear!"

And after catching Avice suddenly round the neck, and violently kissing her, she strode into the hall, past Mr. Stanmore, and up the carriage steps.

When she was seated by the side of Miss Wrickerton, she peered out cautiously from the carriage window, as if looking for Walter Hern, but that boisterous gentleman was half way on his homeward road.

"Good-night, Mr. Sternbore," said she, becoming aware of her disrespectful behaviour to the guardian of Avice. "I quite forgot you, and beg pardon. Drive to Whitehall, you man—to—God bless me! and forgive me for being a fool.

Oh ! Miss Wrickabone," cried she, sinking back as the carriage moved, "Wrickerton—who would have dreamed of that brute of a man—he broke his father's heart, he went and ro—murdered his father by slow degrees, as bad sons murder father, mother, by their goings on ; who would have thought of his living here, his getting rich, the wretch !—his——"

"What does it all mean ?" exclaimed the bewildered lady by her side.

"It means there is no telling black from white," concluded Martha Badge ; "the bad get rich ; the good starve till kingdom come ; if it wasn't for the blessed Bible, one might as well be wrong as right—it wouldn't matter without that the toss up of a button !"

CHAPTER IV.

GUARDIAN AND WARD.

AVICE saw Miss Wrickerton the next day and the next, and many were the long conversations they had together. After everything had been talked over concerning the school, and the children who had received instruction from Miss Wrickerton in Avice's time—Avice remembered all their names, habits and failings—there was Mrs. Badge to take Avice aside and inquire minutely into the rise and progress of Walter Hern, the fortune he had inherited, and the estate he had bought with it. Mrs. Badge was hardly satisfied with the scanty information Avice was in possession of, but nevertheless wasted considerable time in conning over the matter in a corner, leaving Avice and Miss Wrickerton to themselves.

The secret of Avice's position at Olverton House came out in one of these interviews at Miss Wrickerton's cottage, and eagerly did the good little woman embrace the opportunity of offering Avice the shelter of her home.

"You must live with me—there's not an objection in the world," cried Miss Wrickerton. "How thoroughly glad I am now, that I have come into my Rights ! To think we should all meet again, like the witches in Macbeth—excuse

me being uncomplimentary my dear, but I was always fond of similes. What a contented trio we shall make !”

“ But do not misunderstand me, my dear Miss Wrickerton,” said Avice. “ I am not coming as a pensioner on your bounty—your little Avice has become too proud for that. If you will take me on my own conditions, for I am quite an heiress I assure you, I will return to London with you, and leave—leave—Sanderstone—for—ever !”

She had great difficulty in finishing the sentence, and turned away her head at its conclusion, and looked steadily through the window. It was hard to talk of leaving Sanderstone, although these good friends had started up as if by magic—come at the critical moment as people do occasionally in real life, and invariably in novels—and she would not have to face the world alone. It was hard to leave *him* too—it seemed even now cruel and ungrateful after many, many years of kindness. What was she not indebted to him? Were the kind feelings which she should always entertain towards him, payment enough for his adopting her—a Wildflower—for drawing no distinction between her and “ sister” Rosamond?

Rosamond! She should see her before she went to London; she was coming back in three days’ time, that would be Monday next—how surprised poor Rosamond would be!

Avice would be going away with friends after all, but still it was a heavy weight that oppressed her, notwithstanding that bright side to the future—and still, hour by hour, the weight accumulated, and bore her down till she grew nervous and despondent, and was even doubtful if it were right to leave him in his loneliness.

“ Wife, sister, daughter, and now you !” She should never forget the half imploring look which accompanied these words.

After the conference with the schoolmistress, she mentioned to her guardian the propositions that had been made to her, and which she, with his permission, intended to accept.

“ I had expected it,” he said, “ if it please you, Avice, my consent is granted. I will not say willingly—for I do not throw off the last tie with a willing heart.”

“ You do not throw me off, Mr. Stanmore, I hope and trust,” said Avice. “ You spoke of living in London, you

will come and see me very often ? I am not going because I love you less, or have grown tired of my home."

"Thanks. I shall see you now and then, not too often," he added with a faint smile ; "people will talk in London, Avice, as well as Sanderstone."

They went to church together on the Sunday—it was for the last time, and they both felt it very deeply ; Stanmore more severely, perhaps, for he had more to lose. As they returned across the fields, not a word was exchanged between them—they were both silent, Stanmore holding his head loftily and looking straight before him at the distant landscape, Avice with her gaze directed to the green sward at her feet, and hiding a few tears that were falling within her thick lace veil.

It was a miserable Sunday afternoon too ; it came on to rain, and neither Miss Wrickerton nor Mrs. Badge called, and Avice sat at the window praying for some one to arrive, if it were only Walter Hern, and relieve her from her nervousness and from the tramp, tramp of Mr. Stanmore as he walked up and down the room. After a time he left Avice, and did not return to the room until the bells in the old grey turret of Sanderstone church were ringing out for evening service. He came in deathly pale, looking so strangely wild at Avice as he entered, that she grew alarmed.

"Is it raining still ?" he asked in a deep voice.

"Yes, Sir ; raining fast."

He walked to the other window and looked out. Avice's heart beat violently although he stood staring at the rain outside, and not uttering a syllable. When he spoke at last, a rapid throbbing at her temples seemed to keep time to his words. How she prayed some one would come, now !

"Our last Sunday evening, Avice !" in the same strange voice.

"I fear so, Sir."

"How many Sundays have we spent together since you and I met at Richmond for the first time ?"

"A great number," murmured Avice.

"More than we shall spend again : more Sundays than we shall ever, ever spend hours after this, Avice ?"

Avice could not reply.

"I hope they have been happy ones, girl ?"

"Very, very, Sir."

"I hope you will not forget them—that you will have some remembrance of the guardian when you are—with your friends."

"You know, Sir, that he will ever be the first thought of Avice Hern."

"I trust you have forgotten the old days of my harshness, ward," said he, "days of asperity when, soured by trouble or disappointment in my dearest wishes, I have been less than kind."

"O! do not mention them, dear Sir; they are of little moment now."

"Avice, may I ask a more important question?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Have you forgotten also—Edward Clifton?"

"I am learning to forget that foolish engagement, formed and broken before he went to London—learning with all my strength," she answered candidly.

"You would not marry him?"

"No, Sir. Not even if he were a greater poet than John Milton."

There was a long silence, broken only by the pattering of the rain against the glass. The deep stillness was so embarrassing to Avice, that she, with an effort, said:

"Arnold and Rosamond are probably on their journey home by this time. They will reach the Hall late to-night, I think."

"Ay."

Avice, becoming more unaccountably nervous, rose with the intention of adjourning to her own room, when his deep voice startled her again.

"Where are you going, Avice?"

"I—I thought—did you want me, Sir?"

"One moment," said he, huskily, "one moment."

Avice dropped into her chair again with heaving chest and sickening heart. She knew it all then, though he had not spoken a word, or betrayed his secret even by a look until that evening. She knew the whole story, and shrank back from its coming revelation, as he came and stood before her with his white face and ashen lips.

"Avice, what I am going to say, I know and feel will lower me in your regard; yet I must speak before you leave my home and me, casting on both a desolating blight," he

began. "Aware of the folly of every word I utter, yet the unavailing torrent is not to be stemmed by any will of mine—I cannot resist or check it; it is beyond my own control, my own power of command; it urges me to this. You shall not go away believing that I have loved you as a father. I cannot bear the name, coming from your lips, dear Avice. I have loved you with that passion men know and suffer from, and only men like me, whose poetry of life comes when others' die away. I love you now; I shall love your memory; I feel it will be all left for me when a younger man takes you for his wife!"

"Oh, Sir!—oh! dear, dear guardian! do not say another word," implored Avice with streaming eyes.

"Hush! hush!" he cried, holding her hands in his, and looking mournfully upon her. "I say all this to warn you, to bid you not to smile upon me, not to give these hands to me again in welcome, to be ever wary in my presence, to treat me always with that frigid coldness, that reserve with which you would treat a stranger. It will be best for me; it will be more than best! Let me continue; I have but little to say now," said he, relinquishing her hands; "but you must never think, Avice, that I shunned you, closed my study door against you, was harsh or crude, for other reasons than that of hiding 'neath my churlishness the passion of a life. But I was old enough to be your father—I knew all that—I felt all that! the romance and bloom of youth were all vanished with my forty years. I was not worthy of a woman's love with feet plodding to the grave."

"You are worthy of a deeper, truer love than mine, dear guardian," said Avice, slowly, and with difficulty. "Oh! were it in my power to give—oh! had I been but free; had Clifton never been—had—had—"

"Ah! had the hand of time kept me back whilst other lives went on," he answered bitterly; "had I stood aloof whilst the great world rolled by ten years or so, leaving me young and bold to woo."

"I hope that nothing I have said—or done has led—you—"

"No, do not think that Avice," he interrupted quickly; "my love came slowly, surely, from my own wild brain. Perhaps some words wherein your name was mentioned by my poor dying wife vibrated in my mind, when you had

passed from childhood to the woman. No matter what they were. I thought how strange and solemn they sounded in the hour I lost her ; and when you were a gentle loving woman, they seemed, looking back, a prophecy. But it has failed, and you are going away."

"Oh ! Sir, if you love me, say no more."

"I say it but to warn you," repeated he. "I ask you not to give me one gleam of hope, that you will ever share my home, or become an old man's wife. Leave the future dark !"

"Why say this then—why dwell upon it still ? Ah ! guardian, dear guardian, you will leave me now—do, *do*."

"Why dwell upon it ? God knows, Avice ; perhaps there was a lingering wish battling against despair, such a chimera as madmen have in dreams," he answered ; "but this is the waking up for ever ! May you be rewarded, Avice, for the blessing you have been unto my home by a long life of peaceful happiness—a life with brighter dreams than mine, and from which the waking shall be Heaven !"

He stooped, withdrew her hands gently from her face, and kissed her forehead with his burning lips.

"I have been cruel, thoughtless, but forgive me !" said he, in a low tone, "forgive me and keep my secret. The lover dies this night, dear girl ; the guardian, the *father*, if you will, lives on to watch his Avice !"

A long silence. Avice ventured to raise her head. She was alone ; he had stolen noiselessly from the room. What an awful loneliness it seemed ! How the rain beat against the glass !

CHAPTER V

THE MARRIED COUPLE.

WOULD it have been too great a sacrifice to make on that Sunday evening, when he poured forth the long pent story of his love ? Would it have been too much to say, "Let me repay you by the sharing of your home—by the taking of your name ?" Would it have been too great a trial to try and save him from that desolating blight to which he now looked forward ?

He is my guardian, he has been all to me, he stretched his hand out when a little child, and rescued me from poverty and the long weary labour for existence, which poverty entails on the unfortunate—he gave me the same education which he bestowed upon his daughter—he drew no line of distinction between me and his child, and yet—for the sake of even gratitude, I could not extend my own hand in return saying, “I rescue you from despair, from the grind—grind of the heart which knows no love for its own, though its own but consumes and destroys.” Did not duty command it—would the service of a life have made amends for his care and love for me?

Such were Avice’s thoughts when she woke from a troubled dream, and found the sunbeams streaming into her chamber, heralds of another day more in her life, of another day to pass away in Olverton House.

There were other thoughts antagonistic to these—thoughts of how ungenerous it would be to become his wife and not love him—to repay his passion with cold respect—to feel hour by hour that he was her husband, and she had not a wife’s affection for him—that when a little girl she had looked up to him as a father, and now to consider him in a dearer, closer light—to sit by his side and hear romance from his lips!

No, let her go away—it was much better for them both. He with his strong firm mind would soon forget her as the object of his love, and she felt at that moment she would be happier anywhere than at Olverton House, with its thousand painful reminiscences of what had gone and died there.

Yet amidst these hosts of conflicting thoughts there was a strange undefinable sensation, neither of pain nor pleasure, but as if both were mysteriously combined, and each in its turn assumed pre-eminence. It was a strange wild feeling for which there was no accounting, and which Avice did her best, but in vain, to subdue.

Avice saw nothing of Mr. Stanmore all that day, he was not in his study, nor in the house; neither did the servants know anything concerning him, and it was not till the evening when she went to the Hall to welcome Rosamond, that she found he had been there all day awaiting his daughter’s return, and had, for the first time in his life, spent a long day with Waltern Hern.

Rosamond had arrived, and was sitting by her father's side when Avice entered the room. Mr. Stanmore lingered a few moments after his ward's entrance, watching the passionate meeting of the "sisters," then he rose to take leave.

"Come and see me to-morrow, Rosamond," said Stanmore, "come and spend a day with Avice—there are only a few more hours for your sister at Olverton House. I have been telling her, Avice," said he, addressing his ward, "of your proposed departure, how the neighbours are scandalising us—what a deal Mrs. Clifton and her cotemporaries have to say about guardian and ward."

Stanmore withdrew, and left Avice and Rosamond together.

Rosamond, Avice thought, was somewhat pale, but the deep blue eyes were as lustrous as ever, and there was a bright smile on her heart-speaking face. There was nothing about her general appearance which suggested anything more than fatigue, the natural result of a long railroad journey.

"How is Arnold, Rosamond?"

"Very well, dear, and handsomer than ever!"

"And as good a husband as on the day he took you away from Olverton House, Rosamond?"

"Oh! he is a good kind husband, and I am very happy."

"How glad I am to hear that."

"Papa asked me if he was not an irritable man," said Rosamond, with a laugh. "I told him not more irritable than other gentlemen when things went cross with them, up to the general standard of impatience."

"Then there are no regrets? Arnold is a model husband."

"Yes, Avvy, and he is fond of his wife. That is everything—is it not?"

"Everything."

There appeared a restraint upon Rosamond's slight attempts at confidence, and once Avice fancied she detected a timid glance towards the door.

But she was so happy! Each hour of her life had but increased her affection—there had been no waning of love for a single instant, their wedded bliss was perfect—Arnold was ever kind, considerate and faithful!

"They used to say he was wild and strange," said Rosamond; "how cruel to slander my dear Arnold, and circulate such evil reports against him. Is there a greater theft than the robbery of a man's good name? I do not say he is not hasty, my dear papa is even—and there are so many things in life to ruffle the temper of a gentleman—but to me—oh! he is very good to me, Avice, and my life is a happy one!"

Ever harping upon that one word "happy"—forcing its sense upon Avice in a hundred different ways, exerting herself to prove how right she was after all in choosing Arnold Hern!

"I have no doubt of your married life being a smooth one now," said Avice, as Rosamond paused in her recapitulation of the honeymoon trip, for sheer want of breath, "married people sober down in a month or two, and even the honeymoon is a fair test of the future."

"Why is it?"

"I do not know why," replied Avice, rather startled at the abrupt inquiry. "I have no experience in the matter—I argue but from reflection and books of biography. But good husbands fall off, and bad ones are reclaimed, and perhaps there's no rule in the case. Still I think if my cousin Arnold is temperate and affectionate—your father and I had fears for him at one time, if you remember, Rosy?—if he love his young wife, and he would be a cruel man to act otherwise in return for adoration, there is no reason against his continuing to love her, charming her sober marriage days, and regarding her as fondly as on the morning he married her at Branscombe."

They changed the subject of conversation.

"And you are going to leave us, Avvy dear?"

"Do you blame me, sister?"

"No, I cannot blame you, although it is very strange, and only foolish little-minded people believe in the silly reports flying about a country village—but I cannot bear to think my Avice is separating herself from all of us—that we may never see her again."

"That will be your fault then," answered Avice.

"You will come every summer, and spend a long time at the Hall, I know," said the young wife, "and we will be

faithful correspondents, both having much to write about. Oh! if you would live with me."

Avice faintly smiled as she shook her head.

Arnold Hern shortly afterwards entered to pay his respects to his cousin.

With his face more deeply bronzed by a foreign sun, with the absence of that dark lowering look about the brow, which he had before he married Rosamond, he fully bore out the enthusiastic description of his wife, and was certainly "handsomer than ever."

He was in the best of tempers, and shook Avice Hern cordially by both hands.

"What, my cousin, do I hear aright, that you are going to leave us at the very time we are becoming better friends, and have got over all our old disputes?"

"Perhaps we should only get quarrelling once more, if we met too often, Mr. Arnold," said Avice, with a laugh.

"Oh! not we—no more rows, peace and good fellowship, sober married man, 'pon honour."

When he had done laughing at his own protestations, he turned to Rosamond and said,

"I say, Rosamond, here's half a dozen brave fellows just looked in to give me good-day—Sanders, Fishfin, and Squire—hang his name, I always forget it—all jolly dogs and true! My father's with them, come and grace our board, Rosamond—and you, Miss Avice."

"Oh! no—no," cried Rosamond, alarmed. "I must never attend your gentlemen's parties, or speak to all those rude looking men, who stare at me and frighten me. But you go, dear, I—I would much rather be alone than see them."

"But they are not strangers, Rosamond," urged Arnold, "why your own father knows them."

"Oh! but men are very different after they have been drinking all the evening," gently remonstrated Rosamond; "if you remember, whilst we were at Paris—that —"

"Cousin Avice doesn't wish to be bothered with this nonsense, I am sure," interrupted he; "there, I leave you to have your own way, only don't tell everybody I desert you."

"I would not tell such an untruth for all the world, Arnold dear."

"Then you won't play the hostess, dearest?"

"No—no, I am sure you will excuse me."

Avice Hern left for Olverton House about half an hour after this short dialogue between husband and wife; she would have remained longer with her "sister" if Mr. Stanmore had not sent the carriage, and Rosamond had not begun to look ill and weary.

So Avice went home, leaving Rosamond sitting up for Arnold, who with his father was very merry with the country squires, and one of the real baronets.

Rosamond sat alone in a room remote from the scene of the banquet, and counted every hour of the long night, and wished that it had been any other than that of her return. It seemed a strange coming home, sitting by herself there, and starting up now and then with a wild look of affright as the boisterous merriment of the noisy revellers, and their "hip, hip, hurrahs!" came echoing along the corridors.

How tired she was, too! but she was not going to her room for all that. She was sure Arnold would not keep her up late. The gentlemen would depart early, for many of them had a long way to go. Why, could she not hear their carriages and broughams outside already?

But it grew late—the timepiece before her struck twelve; but she knew that was too fast—she had heard the servant say so.

They *were* going; one or two voices could be heard in the passages, and then a carriage drove off. One example at a party was always contagious—they would soon all be gone now!

But Arnold did not come; and though there were fewer guests, there was evidently more merriment amongst them. Yet still Arnold *might* leave his father to entertain them. Oh! she had no doubt that he would do that presently. Why, he was really coming towards the door now—she knew his step so well!

Arnold opened the door, and came with a vacillating step as far as the centre table on which he leaned his hands, and then stared half vacantly at his wife with a pair of dizzy eyes.

"Wouldn't it be better to go to bed, my dear?" he suggested in a very husky voice.

"Won't the people go away?"

"Not yet awhile, m'love."

"Will they stay very long?" she asked, timidly.

Arnold, after a few minutes' grave deliberation, informed her of his inability to decide upon this delicate question; but he thought that she had better go to bed.

"Oh! Don't go back to them, Arnold dear, to-night."

Never 'sult old friends like that, who had come to shake hands and wishjoym. It was against his inclination; but he thought it would be much better for all parties if she would only go to bed.

So Rosamond went to her bridal chamber, and Arnold rejoined his friends who were passing the bottle briskly, and who greeted him with a long ringing yell at his defection as he made his reappearance.

Rosamond covered her pretty head with the bed-clothes, in order to stifle the noise which came welling up to her. Now and then she peeped out, or sat up in bed, and tried to hear his stumbling steps upon the stairs.

Like a good wife, she made allowance for his meeting with old friends, and did not chide him when he woke her from her first sleep in the grey morning, and gave the signal of his approach by knocking over a chair and a few chimney ornaments.

"It was only for once in a way," she thought. "He was a very good husband, and she was very, very happy!"

CHAPTER VI.

GOING AWAY.

THREE more days, and then Avise Hern was going to London. How those three days sped on! what a deal there was to prepare, to think about, to weep over! What a deal of preparation, thinking, and weeping falls to the lot of us all, when we go away "for good!"

At the last moment, Avice wished that she had told Rosamond of the proposal Mr. Stanmore had made her; and yet his strange look when he took leave of them at the Hall, on the evening the daughter came home, implied eternal silence concerning his love story.

And perhaps it was best after all; for Rosamond might have used her entreaties to persuade Avice to reconsider her resolution, and thus have only given her further pain.

Olverton House began to assume a dismal, woe-begone appearance. All the servants caught the infection, and stole about the house like mutes. Everybody seemed using his or her best endeavours to show Avice how her loss would be felt, and what hearts she had won by her gentleness and kindness. Katie, by some mysterious means, also got scent of Avice's proposed departure, and came crying to the house to see Miss Hern, "the good lady, the only one who had ever been a friend to her." This was another trial to Avice, the wild abandonment to grief of this half-witted handsome girl. "What should she do? what was to become of her—oh! good Lord, what was to become of her now?"

Katie departed crying and wringing her hands down the Sanderstone road, bemoaning to every villager she met upon the way the loss of her best friend, the little lady at Olverton House.

Mr. Stanmore was awaiting her in the old sitting-room on the morning of her departure. He received her with a sickly smile, and asked her how long it would be before Miss Wrickerton's carriage came to fetch her.

"About half-an-hour, I think."

"Have you taken leave of Rosamond?"

"Yes, last night," replied Avice, with a faltering voice.

"You must write and give me your address, ward," said he. "Business may require me to visit you at some future day."

"You will call very often, I hope, guardian."

"Better not," he said in a low voice.

Avice coloured, and hastened to another subject. She need not have feared any recapitulation of the scene of last Sunday; for he quickly went on in a different course himself. Mr. Stanmore was not a man to give way more than once in a life time; the flood-gates were barred over his heart now with triple bands of steel, he thought; and he was a

man of the world again, a man of strong nerve who had crushed out the poetry of his nature in one shock.

He was very pale, the lines on his forehead and round the eyes appeared deeply graven, and greater in number, and the hair was more of an iron grey. He seemed a man who could have suffered from anything but the tender passion—he looked so old and grave.

“There is a talk of a general election throughout the country,” said he, “a dissolution of Parliament, which will throw out many of the soft heads who have got in by interest and high patronage; sturdy John Bull is shaking his shoulders, and taking a fierce survey of the state of the nation. I have received a letter to stand for Ploughshire, Avice—it would be a new excitement to study politics, to keep late hours at the House, and cry, ‘hear—hear!’ Perhaps I should get my manuscript of ‘The State’ off my hands if I had M.P. to my name, eh, Avice? But I had better turn secretary once more—it’s the old life, and would suit me. Ah! here’s the carriage.”

At the same moment as Miss Wrickerton’s carriage drew up at the front door, the groom brought round Mr. Stanmore’s horse.

“I shall see you to Branscombe,” said he.

“But Mr. Stanmore ——”

“But Avice, it is the ‘last scene of all,’ and,” he muttered, “‘a strange eventful history’ it has been.”

Avice was forced to take the arm of her guardian, and lean on it for support, when she was in the hall.

“I did not expect this!”

The servants were all assembled, even to the gardeners, and many pairs of red eyes were bent wistfully on Avice as she stopped and held out her hands to them. She tried to express her thanks, but her voice failed in the effort, and after a minute or two, whilst she was shaking hands with the domestics, she could see nothing for the thick mist that hid everything.

“God bless you, Miss,” whimpered the butler, who was considered a stern unyielding man, but whose face was swelled with suppressed convulsion of grief, “a long life of prosperity to you, Miss.”

The servants heartily echoed his wish, and many of the

men ran beside the carriage when it was fairly off for another last look at Miss Hern.

It was a long ride to Branscombe, a long, lonely, desolate ride to Avice, for all the companions she had by her side—and more lonely and desolate to the solitary outrider, than even to her.

They were not at Branscombe before twelve in the morning, and when they were on the platform it was a dreary and miserable conversation they endeavoured to sustain during the twenty minutes preceding the departure of the train. But the travellers began to stream in—Miss Wrickerton's carriage had been hoisted on the truck, her horses were making a terrible noise in their respective boxes, and the engine was smoking and hissing, and looked eager to be off.

From amidst the bustling crowd came Arnold and Rosamond, pushing their way towards the party.

"You did not think we were going to be put off with a good-bye at home, Avvy," cried Rosamond, "we are too old friends for that."

"Thank you, thank you," answered Avice, with quivering lips.

"But it shall not be a long good-bye," said Rosamond; "we shall meet very often, you and I."

"I hope so."

"And we will be faithful correspondents; we shall have a great deal to write about, dear Avice," continued Rosamond.

"Oh! yes, a great deal to write about," responded Avice, in an absent manner.

A long silence, then Avice, extending both her hands to Rosamond, cried:

"Yes, yes, it is a long good-bye. I fear that we shall not see each other very soon again. Heaven's blessing on you, sister Rosy!"

When the bell had been ringing full a minute, they were still shaking hands, embracing and weeping.

"Good-bye, Sir," said Avice, turning to Mr. Stanmore, last of all.

"Good-bye, Avice ——"

He was going to add more, but something choking his further utterance, he pressed the hands that lay within his

own, shook them warmly, and then resigned them without another word.

He stood watching the guard hurrying Avice towards the carriages, and quite heedless of the light talk that Arnold was indulging in by his side.

"Don't you think so?" concluded Arnold.

"Eh?"

"It's always the way at Branscombe. I say, who was that old woman with the staring eyes?"

"Who—what old woman—there, she's gone!"

"Dear—dear Avice," cried Rosamond, as she came sobbing towards her father and husband, "it seems going away for ever! How strange it all is—oh! how miserable I feel."

"She's an old friend, eh, Rosamond?"

Rosamond murmured something in the affirmative.

"Ah! you must feel it very deeply, child—such companions as you have been together too. There goes the train!" he removed his hat as Avice looked her last farewell from the window; "there's Avice—God speed her!"

God speed all travellers beginning life anew, and setting forth upon a journey, the end of which is hidden—too wisely hidden—from their view!

God speed all wanderers from home, all those who, looking life before them boldly in the face, leave the well-beaten track, and make for the Beyond, not rashly confident in their own power to do, but moving onward to the goal, with Hope and Faith for guiding stars!

END OF THE SEVENTH BOOK

BOOK VIII.

‘Nay then, thou dost suspect there’s something wrong.”

MRS. HANNAH MORE’S “PERCY.”

Act I. Scene I.

“Even such is time, that takes on trust
Our youth, our joys, our all we have,
And pays us but with age and dust;
Who in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days.”

SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

CHAPTER I.

TOWN.

Two years since Avice Hern came to London. Twice three hundred and sixty-five days of births, deaths and marriages, have gone the ways of all days since the guardian and ward parted at Branscombe railway station, and began the world afresh.

Both have begun it by stepping backwards as it were, and moulding their future by the past; by living—so far as the retrogression is possible—the old times over again with friends long since left behind by the wayside, both wondering mayhap why the flowers are not as bright and fresh as when they gathered them years ago.

There is no living the past over again—though we sit down to the same table, and have for companions on each side and around us the dear comrades of a bygone era; though we talk of the age that has flown, and made no change in our friendship, or follow those pursuits that have been once our calling or our pleasure, there is still something jarring about all we do and say, and we find ourselves not the men of that time, but only the caricatures of what we have been.

Mr. Stanmore is in office. He has left Sanderstone, and Olverton House is in the hands of the stranger. His own ability, backed by many friends at court, has procured him another secretaryship, although not at the old office near Whitehall, and he now buries himself in papers, studies statistics, takes to the hours of ten till four, is a sharp practical man of business, and a good servant to the crown.

He has not won many hearts in his new character—the Stanmore of Whitehall was a good tempered, good looking fellow, with a smile for every man in the office, and not a whit too proud to give him good-day, when he met him face to face: but this Stanmore is a stern dark faced gentleman, who looks not to the right or the left, upon whose ear words

seem to fall unheedingly, a man who passes not lightly over the escapades of his subordinates, and is not backward, when occasion requires, in severe comment concerning them. He occasionally associates with his compeers; he dines with them now and then, and gives a formal dinner party in return at his ugly-looking house in Great George Street, Westminster.

And Wildflower? Well, she thought that she should have been happier. She had anticipated everything that could make her happy with her old friends; and yet she often finds herself stealing up to her own room for one of those "good thinks," which she used to enjoy at Sanderstone.

She is quite a prim, sober little lady, now that she has come of age and received her legacy. "Just as much chance o' being married," says the cook to the under housemaid, "as Missus or Missus Badge."

Avice tries hard enough to be happy; and Miss Wrickerton and Martha Badge, not observers of the first water, believe the days are too short for her light heart and good spirits, and congratulate themselves in having gained so desirable a companion. Their only fear appears to be that of losing her, of some one meeting her in the street (for she *will* go out alone at times notwithstanding all remonstrance), falling desperately in love with her, following her home, coming into the house, and insisting upon being considered engaged to her before he leaves the premises.

Avice not only tries hard to be happy, but tries hard to believe she must be. What is there to cross her save a few stray memories which everybody has, and puts up with, learning from them a lesson of endurance? She is loved by those two old women as a daughter is loved; no hope of a family has ever been so petted, or made so much of. Nothing is too good for "our Avice," no attention is out of place to her, no one half so amiable or good looking in all London!

It is a fine house in one of the London squares wherein Avice is a dweller; and perhaps its contrast to Olverton House and Sanderstone makes her life dull. Perhaps London air does not agree with her; perhaps even the companionship of Miss Wrickerton and Martha Badge is not on the whole so suitable for her as that of Mr. Stanmore and his daughter.

"No, no, not that," thinks Avice. "I love them both too well to be miserable because they do not understand me sometimes, or because I have no one of my own age, tastes, or pursuits, to converse with and call a friend. I don't know what it is. It's my own wicked disposition, I suppose ; and I must keep it down."

She has not spent a summer month with Rosamond yet ; but she is going to the Hall this summer—that is, in a week or two—and shall then see Rosamond's little boy, and that little boy's mamma who writes such long letters, and who is still so happy !

Avice has been to look at the old office near Whitehall, has stood in the street, and gazed up at its many windows, recalling the time when her tiny feet used to patter along the corridors, and up and down the winding stairs, after her grandfather and Mrs. Badge, as he or she went "the rounds" in the dusk of the evening, barring and closing the ponderous shutters, and locking all the doors. She has even been as far as the railings, and looked down at the "housekeeper's room," wondering if Mr. Mackins and his wife (they were married before her grandfather was in his grave) were still there, and ever remembered the Herns. She has been extravagant enough, also, to trust herself with "all manner of people" on a cheap steamboat plying between Westminster and London Bridges, and has had a good look at the back of the place, at the window of her own little room, and at the stone wall of the garden on which old Hern used to sit and take snuff.

Ah ! gentle reader, we dare say you in your time have had such fancies as the heroine of this book, and been none the worse for them. Have you never found yourself standing before the home of years ago ; the home whose rooms no more echo to your tread, and whose roof is to shelter you never again ? Have you looked up at the windows thinking of the chamber of the past, and murmured, "There was I born," or "There slept my brothers," or "There died my dear mother !" and turned away at last with the blinding tears in the eyes, and a sense of something like holiness throbbing at the heart ? Did not all the years spent since that time appear for a moment but a dream, till you woke to reality, and to the consciousness of strange faces peering curiously at you from over the blinds, or to the ghost of a

place, dark and haunted, with "This House to Let" staring from it in the biggest of black capitals?

In one of these rambles, Avice comes face to face with Mr. Clifton. He is hurrying along, with flying hair, flying coat, and plenty of flying thoughts, and just glances at her as he passes. Avice experiences a tremor in every limb which is followed by a feeling of relief to find that he has passed her, which ends in another revulsion of feeling as he comes flying back again, and intercepts her progress.

"Miss Hern! I did not think that I could be mistaken."

He extends his hand, and shakes hers warmly; and Avice has to say twice, "How do you do, Mr. Clifton?" before he appears to comprehend.

"I am quite well, thank you," he says. "But are you alone? Do you expect a friend?"

"No, Mr. Clifton," she answers. "I am sometimes rash enough to venture forth without an escort."

"London streets are not the green lanes of Sanderstone, Miss Hern," he says, "but—may I claim the privilege of an old friend?"

"No, no; I am detaining you. I have only—"

"For a few moments," he urges.

Avice takes his arm somewhat timidly; and there are those two old lovers straying along together. Could the duchess of the Shrubbery but have had that wonderful perspective glass of Prince Ali's, what a horrible morning she would have spent!

But there is no cause for fear. Avice feels no fluttering in her breast after the first shock of meeting; she is as calm, composed and lady-like as if her *chaperon* was her brother. She feels assured that the love she has had for him is no longer a troublesome occupant of her heart. She can hardly imagine they were once going to be married at Sanderstone church. He is "an old friend"—nothing more to her.

"So you are living in London, Miss Hern," he says. "I have always had an impression that you were at the Hall with Rosamond." A flush sweeps across his face as he adds: "And Mrs. Hern, she is well, I trust?"

"Yes, thank you. We correspond of course."

"Of course," he reiterates; "and Mr. Stanmore?"

"I have seen him but once in two long years," she replies; "then he was well, but looking pale."

"With whom are—?" He stops short in his inquiry.

"I have been residing with old friends since the death of Miss Stanmore."

"Oh! indeed."

He makes no further comment upon Avice's change of life, but darts to another subject.

"Have you seen my mother lately, Miss Hern?"

"Not since I left Sanderstone."

"I was at Sanderstone three weeks ago. I spent a few days there—spent them entirely at the Shrubbery, dedicating them to the mother I have long abandoned."

"Your mother enjoys good health, I hope?" says Avice.

"Very good health, I thank you," he answers. "She has been persuading me to return to the Shrubbery; and I have been using my best endeavours to induce her to come to London, and keep house for me; and I hope in time to come off victorious."

"You must miss your mother very much."

"Yes," he replies, "and I feel myself an ingrate for having deserted her; but as you are aware—for I find my mother has betrayed my secret—my presence in London is often most essential."

"You have adopted literature as a profession, I have heard?"

"Ah! and what a glorious profession it is!"

"To the successful writer," adds Avice. "I can imagine no profession more honourable or more pleasant—but to the poor scribes, men without names, men whose existence is ignored by their more fortunate brethren—there can be nothing more pitiable or humiliating."

"True, true!" says Clifton; "but then it is in their power to choose another profession more suitable to their small abilities."

Very proudly is that sentence uttered, with a full consciousness of his own superior qualifications, and with a perfect knowledge of his position in the world of letters. Clifton has been a lucky man, there has been no up-hill journey over stony roads for him—a bound from the crowd of unknowns to the topmost branch of the tree!

Whether his genius be worthy of his exalted position or not, matters little to the purport of this tale, but Avice Hern feels how different an individual he is to the Edward Clifton

who bade her a long good-bye at Olverton House—feels that with all his genius, and his success in life, she could never experience those same feelings towards him which she has entertained for the poet in the bud.

He may not have forgotten Avice—may have found the Avice of the past shine the brighter in contrast to those crowds of fair ones he has since sat beside, and talked nonsense to—may have met with few in his new sphere to remind him of his second love—may have remembered amidst all the pride which has grown upon him, and all the overweening estimate of his own importance, that courtship began in jealousy and ended in its day of brightest promise, and remembered it also with some feelings of regret.

After a pause, he begins to talk of those past days at Sanderstone—of their continental journey when Rosamond was ill, even of his desire to be considered still a friend, that Avice is glad when they are in the square.

"This is your place of residence," says he, as Avice stops.

"Yes."

"I shall call now and then, for the sake of old times."

Avice murmurs an unintelligible reply.

"I shall lend you the proof-sheets of my next book, Miss Avice," he says, "perhaps you might be kind enough to offer a suggestion—I remember you a clever critic."

"No, no," cries Avice quickly. "I—"

She checks herself, and adds more calmly,

"Great authors take no advice but their own, Mr. Clifton."

"Yes, but—" he stops, silently shakes hands with her, and goes away in a meditative mood.

The next day comes a packet of handsomely bound volumes—*his* works. There is no note attached, but "the kind regards of the author," is scrawled upon the fly leaf.

Avice is doubtful whether she ought to return the books, or not—and yet they are his own writings, and the action would be something very like an insult. Miss Wrickerton and Mrs. Badge think it extremely mysterious, and the latter lady tells Miss Wrickerton in confidence, "that he used to be their dear Avice's young man once, but there was a terrible quarrel, and they broke it off."

"He must have been in the wrong," says Miss Wrickerton, in a tone implying her unshaken conviction of that fact,

"and, therefore, my dear Mrs. Badge, you may rely upon it, he's no better than he should be."

The young man no better than he should be, makes a morning call a few days after this, much to the suppressed indignation of Miss Wrickerton, who receives him with most frigid courtesy.

"I have to thank you for those volumes, Mr. Clifton," says Avice. "I wish you had reserved them for one better able to appreciate them. I am no judge of poetry."

"You will understand them, at least," he replies, "and it is not every reader can do that."

"Conceited as a peacock," thinks Miss Wrickerton.

He lingers till the last moment talking to Avice of poetry and Sanderstone, and paying great attention to Miss Wrickerton. When he has gone, Martha Badge comes in (she never sees company on any pretence whatever) and looks hard at Avice.

Avice colours and laughs.

"You need not be afraid, Mrs. Badge."

"I thank the Lord for that!"

"Well, I didn't like to say anything before, my dear," asserts Miss Wrickerton, "but I'm very glad to hear you say so. He was your young man once, Mrs. Badge tells me."

"Yes," replies Avice, still blushing.

"A curious young man, 'stuck up,' no doubt—ah! he'd never do for my Avice."

"I never could abide poets," affirms Mrs. Badge, "nor poetry nor any such nonsense."

"I hope he won't come again," adds Miss Wrickerton. "You must find it painful to see him, my dear. It must be always very painful to see the man whom we were once going to marry, heigho!"

Miss Wrickerton heaves an unconscious sigh, and falls into an odd train of thought, from which Avice makes no effort to arouse her.

She is thinking deeply herself—thinking it is very foolish of Edward Clifton to come and see her, and undoubtedly very painful, as Miss Wrickerton observed a moment or two ago.

It may be the common politeness of a friend, but still it is foolish—she hopes that it is his last visit, she is sure she does not want to see him any more. She can hardly keep

from crying for no possible reason in the world—everything seems strange and curious that day.

There is a morning-paper on a side table, and she snatches it up, and forces herself to read all the leading articles. In another column of the newspaper, there is a critique on a new work, called "The State," a heavy long winded critique, garnished with extracts, which discourse upon Parliament, and debates, and figures, but she reads it all through attentively—reads it twice over, and forgets all about the young man who is no better than he should be.

CHAPTER II.

FRIENDS FROM THE COUNTRY.

EDWARD CLIFTON, notwithstanding the pressure of his literary occupation, found time to call once in the course of a week or fortnight at Miss Wrickerton's house in the square. His agreeable gentlemanly ways soon softened the obduracy of Miss Wrickerton's behaviour towards him, and he was too old a friend of Avice's for Avice to treat him, after the first visit, with any studied reserve.

But what did he come for? Why did he seek her out again for a friend, he who was always complaining of want of time, and increased literary labour, and of many friends whom he never could find an opportunity to see? Was he seeking to win her affections back by way of atonement? He who held his head so high in the world now. Surely he could tell by her manner that she had long awakened from her love dream.

Oh, no! It was too improbable that he should entertain any tender feelings towards her—he had not done so in his heart at Sanderstone, how much the less likely now he was constantly being fêted, and lionized, and called a genius.

But love is made up of contradictions—there is no rule for its coming and going—it is all inconsistency and mystery—nothing is too improbable for it in real life—it is "stranger than fiction!"

Edward Clifton, a man of acute observation, had really begun to think Avice would make a good wife for a poet,

would understand him and his writings, and be not unworthy of his choice!—but unfortunately at that very time, Avice had arrived at a different conclusion, and had formed a far different estimate of Edward Clifton's character; now there was an opportunity of judging it without the rose coloured bandage over her eyes.

Avice had been compelled to postpone her visit to the Hall, owing to a sudden increase of indisposition in Miss Wrickerton, and as that lady, when suffering from ailments, could not bear Avice out of her sight, so Avice, all that long beautiful summer, patiently kept by the side of the pillowed chair, and nursed her schoolmistress.

There came a strange letter to Avice in the autumn, a letter from Clifton, avowing his attachment, and making her a second offer of his hand. He spoke of their last engagement, and of what a happy time it was; he even alluded to the "Diary," as the record of events long past, and which bore no relation to the present time—he spoke also of the wife he would choose—one fit for a poet—one who could sympathise with all his aspirations, and share in his literary triumphs—and where in the wide world was one more fitting than Avice Hern of Sanderstone?—she who had confessed her love for him in the years that had passed! It was a long letter, written with earnestness and evidencing affection—tinged now and then with his natural and naïve conceit—a letter worthy of an eccentric young man who had dabbled in love all his life.

Avice did not read the letter without some tears, and some of the old throbbings at the bosom—it was so like their past engagement to read a letter breathing love and love's vows, and written by his hands; but it did not take one minute to decide. She was astonished at her own calmness when she had finished her reply to his note. She felt that she made no sacrifice in declining the proffered honour, in stating her conviction that they were in every way unfitted for each other, in wishing him a long and prosperous career, and a better wife than she could ever make him. So they parted a second time. Edward Clifton's next volume of poetry was imbued with a more mournful and sarcastic tinge, but he sustained his disappointment very well, accepted all the invitations from his aristocratic patrons, and bore not the slightest resemblance to a lion that had been crossed in love.

One afternoon, late in the autumn, Miss Wrickerton was reclining in her pillowed chair, enjoying a half doze, and Avice was looking over some old letters in her desk—ah, those old letters, what babies they make of us!—when Mrs. Badge bounced with an alarming precipitancy into the room.

“Oh! good gracious, here’s Walter Hern—the wretch! and his son, and his son’s wife—the whole bunch of ’em, as I’m a sinner.”

“Rosamond,” cried Avice, heaping the letters back to their place, and starting up with a joyful cry.

“I’m glad, my dear, she’s come,” said Martha, “although I’ve seen but little of her, yet, there’s no doubt she’s a good and ’spectable young woman—but to think of Walter Hern having the owdaciousness!”

“But Walter Hern is an uncle, and—”

“Now don’t *you* say a word for him—you of everybody on earth,” cried Martha, “you know what he has been all his life, and there’s nothing too bad for him to do. Here’s some one coming—I won’t wait—I won’t see anybody—if the fellow asks where I am, say I’m dead, my dear!”

Martha beat her retreat as the servant entered with the visitors’ cards.

“Admit them—admit them!” said Miss Wrickerton, “and very glad I am,” turning to Avice, “to see your friends have not forgotten you, child! Do you know, Avice,” continued the lady, as the servant withdrew, “Mrs. Badge frightens me about your uncle. Was he so very bad a man, my dear?”

Avice hesitated to reply, and before Miss Wrickerton could repeat her question, the tenants of the Hall were ushered into the room.

“My dear, dear Avvy!”

“My dearest Rosamond!”

They flew into each other’s arms, and a long embrace was sure evidence of the love that no time could make less.

After Walter Hern had been introduced to Miss Wrickerton, Avice was at liberty to greet Arnold and her uncle, and Rosamond free to exchange a few words with the invalid lady whom she had met at Branscombe railway station.

“Well, girl,” said Walter, shaking hands with Avice,

"you won't think any the worse of us for bringing Rosamond to spend the day with you?"

"It was very, very kind of you."

Arnold advanced to greet her.

"Glad to see you once more, cousin," said he, "although sorry that you have lost your country looks."

"You think I have then?"

"You look pale and ill," he answered, "this London air does not agree with you—you must come to Sanderstone for a week or two when Miss Wrickerton is better."

"*He* looks well enough, anyhow," said Walter Hern, seating himself by Avice's side, as Arnold, after a few more words, crossed to Miss Wrickerton and Rosamond, "he takes good and bad together, and it all agrees with him—never knew such a fellow in my life!"

Hern's speech fell almost unheeded on the ear of Avice; she was watching Rosamond as she talked to Miss Wrickerton, and was struck for the first time with the great change in her appearance, with the angular look about the face, the absence of that bloom on the cheeks which had added such attraction to her girlish beauty, the slightness of her figure, and her apparent weakness—why, she did not look stronger than the invalid by whose side she sat!

"Oh! Mr. Hern, how Rosamond has altered," cried Avice.

"Do you think so?" he answered; "well, people tell her that she's ill—but I don't see much difference, myself—I suppose that's because I'm always with her."

"I—I hope they lived happily?" she asked, in a lower tone.

"About the same as other married couples," he said, with one of his repulsive laughs; "they don't quarrel, at all events. Upon my soul, at times I wish the girl had a trifle more pluck in her—for," lowering his voice, "Arnold boy has an awful temper of his own—worse luck!"

"He does not show it to his wife, I hope."

"It bursts out at times," said Walter, "and things have been going contrary with him lately, and—and he's not very partial to the young un's squealing, and goes out—but Lord bless you! Rosamond never complains, and it soon blows over."

"Where is the baby?" asked Avice.

"Why—why, Rosamond," he cried, "where's the boy?"

"Nurse has it—I, I was afraid that it might be noisy and disturb Miss Wrickerton."

"My dear Mrs. Hern, I beg you will not think of anything so silly," exclaimed Miss Wrickerton. "I'm not easily disturbed, I assure you. The idea of keeping the poor baby out of the room—nonsense."

She rang the bell.

"Tell the nurse to be good enough to bring up the baby," said Miss Wrickerton to the servant, "disturb me, indeed—I have had too much to do with children to dislike babies."

"He's a noisy young rascal," said Arnold, with a laugh; "when he grows up, he'll be better company."

The baby was triumphantly brought in—it was a tiny, pale faced infant, with round, staring blue eyes—one of those babies whose dreamy looks strike a beholder for the first time with awe, they are so suggestive of a something unakin to earth.

Little Arnold gave a feeble little cry of pleasure as he was transferred to the arms of his young mother.

"How old is he?" asked Avice, as she bent over the child.

"One year."

"A year, my dear," repeated Miss Wrickerton, "why, bless—ahem!—and a boy, too—is he not rather small for his age?"

"I do not know—I do not think so," replied Rosamond, looking tenderly at the infant in her lap; "the doctor says he's a fine boy—he is very pretty, is he not, Avice?"

"His mother's eyes."

"And his father's look, too."

"Rosamond wants to persuade me the child's face is like mine," said Arnold; "I tell her that children are all the same, till they are six or seven years old—you might just as well say an apple dumpling's like me, at present."

"Well, we will be going, Arnold," said Walter.

"Surely not—my gracious—this is a very short stay, indeed," exclaimed Miss Wrickerton.

"You will not leave us, Rosamond, I know?" said Avice.

"I have come to spend this afternoon and evening with you, if you will be kind enough to bear with baby," said Rosamond. "Arnold will fetch me about ten."

She looked wistfully at her husband.

"Yes, I'll come!" he answered.

"But you will not go without —?" began Miss Wrickerton.

"Beg pardon, my dear lady, but we are really pressed for time," said Walter; "we have only come up to London on important business, and must return the day after to-morrow."

Shortly after her husband and father-in-law had paid their respects to Miss Wrickerton and taken leave, Rosamond and baby were quite at home in Avice's own little boudoir.

"Have you seen your father, Rosamond?" asked Avice, as she held the baby on her lap.

"Not yet," she answered. "I am going to spend a long day with him to-morrow. I have not seen him since baby was christened. He was at the christening—how old he was looking then, and how altered!"

"Yes; he has altered."

Avice did not say she had seen Mr. Stanmore only once in two long years, for fear of giving pain to Rosamond.

"And how have you been, Avice dear?"

"Very well; and you?"

"Oh! could I be anything but well and happy with that dear child?"

"What a very pretty child he is."

"So they all say," said Rosamond, proudly; "what did Miss Wrickerton mean by calling my boy 'small'?"

"I suppose some babies are larger at his age."

"Do you think that he is a heavy child?"

Rosamond waited so eagerly for her reply, that Avice could but answer, though he lay like a feather in her arms—

"Rather heavy, I think."

"I had such a fright given me by that foolish girl Katie, some weeks since," said Rosamond, "oh! what a silly, witless girl she is."

"Do you see her often?"

"I have taken her into service at the Hall."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, and one day as she stood by me, she looked so strangely at the baby in my arms, that I almost felt my heart stop beating."

"But she is a strange girl, dear sister."

"Yes ; but when I asked her why she looked at the baby in that manner, she said, 'he put her in mind of a little brother she had had once, who was just as pale, and weak, and who died about his age, and went to Heaven.' What a foolish girl to tell me that !"

"You should not listen to her, Rosy."

"I try not ; but I like the girl ; she is affectionate and willing," answered Rosamond. "But—oh !" with a sudden wild cry, "if *my* baby died and went to Heaven, I should die too ! I feel I should. I could not live without my little Arnold."

She snatched the child from the arms of Avice, pressed him to her breast, and covered him with kisses.

"Your husband is looking well," said Avice, hastening to change the subject.

"Yes, he is well and strong," replied Rosamond. "He is a good husband," with a sigh.

"My uncle tells me that he has not quite given up his passionate fits, Rosamond."

"No, not quite," replied she. "If it were possible to love him better, I think I should, if he were—sometimes—a little more considerate. Not that I blame him," she added, hastily ; "not that he is cross to *me*—oh ! no, no, no, no ! But you see, Avvy dear, so many people come to the Hall ; and there is a great deal of hunting, drinking, and gambling ; my father-in-law is fond of company, and he keeps his parties up so late, that Arnold gets excited now and then. But I am sure," she added, "he does all in his power to make me—happy."

"It is his duty."

"To be sure ; and he is not the man to neglect it," said Rosamond in reply.

"They have plenty of visitors at the Hall, then ?"

"Yes. I," with a shudder, "never see the guests. This is my company," looking down upon the baby. "This is all I wish, except my husband's, and a dear friend's in London."

She paused a moment, then went on.

"You must come and see me as soon as Miss Wrickerton is better," said Rosamond. "I have been counting up the days. Come in the winter—but come !"

"I wait for the first opportunity, dear sister."

"You must not mind the noisy evenings, dear. We can go to one of the rooms at the back of the house, and be quite quiet, you and I and baby."

"I do not mind noise ; my nerves are pretty strong."

"I wish mine were ; for I am full of fancies. Sometimes I fancy my strength is failing me. I cannot walk like I used—I can hardly get up to the churchyard once a week to see poor aunt's grave," said Rosamond. "I went to Richmond to-day with Arnold. There are flowers there—tokens that my Avice has not forgotten mother."

She was very weak ; for she held down her head, and cried.

"I shall be glad," said Rosamond, looking up after a time, and brushing her tears away, "when the Hall is sold."

"Sold !" repeated Avice.

"Hush ! they have not told me about it," said Rosamond "but I think before next summer we shall have to find a pretty villa, or a house of more moderate dimensions." "Indeed !"

"Mr. Hern has come up to London to effect another mortgage on the property. I can do no harm in telling *you*, Avice."

"No," said Avice ; "but I am very much surprised."

"We shall be happier in a smaller house," said Rosamond. "I do not know much of the world or its ways ; but I know enough to believe that when we are poorer, some of those noisy, boisterous friends will drop away from Arnold, and he will find out for what he has been sought so long, and valued so highly."

"Has Arnold or his father been extravagant ?" asked Avice.

"They have lost a great deal of money on horses lately," replied Rosamond, "I don't know how or when. I hear them talking about races frequently, and of their run of ill-luck. They do not trouble me about money matters, or the state of their affairs. Old Mr. Hern asked me once whether I should care to leave the Hall, as he was afraid he should have to give it up."

"My uncle asked you ?"

"Yes ; he is very kind to me in his way, although very rough and strange. He often spends an hour with

me, talking about Arnold. He has nursed the baby once ! ”

They had a good laugh about Walter Hern nursing his grandchild ; and Rosamond brightened up a bit, and went down to Miss Wrickerton in better spirits.

It was a long, pleasant evening after that.

Before Arnold Hern came to fetch his wife, Mrs. Badge had, at the urgent solicitation of Avice, ventured to appear, and was taking a great interest in the baby sleeping in the mother's lap, when the lively summons on the street-door knocker forced her to a hasty and unceremonious retreat.

Arnold came in, and Rosamond and baby were soon ready for their journey home.

Whilst Rosamond was engaged with Miss Wrickerton, Avice addressed her cousin.

“ Rosamond looks very poorly, Mr. Arnold,” began she. “ Has she had advice ? ”

“ Oh, yes ! she has had advice,” he answered ; “ you fancy she is looking ill now, then, Avice ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Ah ! that's pure fancy. Ask her if she's ill.”

“ She would never own it.”

“ Nonsense ! ” said he, laughing.

Avice availed herself of his good temper to say :

“ I hope that you do not neglect her for your fox-hunting squires, and your race-courses, Mr. Arnold. She has a heart that neglect would easily break ; for it is a heart all her husband's.”

“ I do my best, Avice,” he said, slightly colouring ; “ but I am a hasty, light-headed, passionate chap. I can't help it,” dismissing the thought with a toss of the light head in question. “ I've been too wilful a boy to be a meek, lackadaisical man.”

“ But when you are a ‘ hasty, light-headed, passionate chap,’ ” said Avice, smiling, “ think of the dear little wife who is never hasty or passionate, and who loved you well enough to run away with you.”

“ Ah ! she's too good for me,” said he, moodily ; “ she always was. I'm only fit for——Come, Rosamond ; or our worthy cabman will expire with impatience.”

“ Good-night, Avvy,” said Rosamond, kissing her “ I

shall try and persuade papa to accompany me to-morrow night, when I come to say adieu."

"I shall be very glad to see him," answered Avice, as she returned the kiss, and bestowed another on the baby.

A few more good-nights and shaking of hands, and then Arnold, his wife and child and the nurse had gone home, leaving Miss Wrickerton and Avice seated together by the fire. Mrs. Badge came in and joined them.

"The mother and child look very ill," said Miss Wrickerton.

"She's married to a Hern," gruffly commented Martha.

"Poor child! I don't think she's happy. What do *you* think, Avice?"

"I am afraid to think about it," said Avice, sighing.

"It was a love-match, wasn't it?" asked Miss Wrickerton.

"Yes."

"Poor girl!"

"Did you see the child?" inquired Mrs. Badge. "Did you ever see a child lie like a stone all day, and stare, and pick, pick at anything with its fingers, and live to grow up like other children? I never did."

"Oh! don't say that, Martha—don't say that!"

Martha went on muttering, "She was worried before the child was born; she's worried now out of her life—I see it all—it's plain enough."

Avice prayed that night for the future well-being of Rosamond Hern's baby boy, that he might live to grow up and be a blessing to his mother, feeling as she prayed that it was the only blessing that mother had before her—the only hope to cling to, and that so weak and frail!

CHAPTER III.

CONVERSATIONS.

"I SUPPOSE young Mrs. Hern will call and say good-bye," said Miss Wrickerton on the evening of the following day, "but it's getting very late."

"Oh ! yes, she is sure to come," replied Avice.

"I wonder whether she will be able to induce Mr. Stanmore to accompany her," remarked Miss Wrickerton. "Do you know, Avice, it's my impression that Mr. Stanmore, although a very nice, agreeable gentleman, is for all that a very proud one."

"Not a bit," cried Martha Badge, waking up from a slight doze over some needle-work.

"What makes you think that he is a proud man ?" asked Avice.

"There's a way with him that strikes me," replied Miss Wrickerton ; "and he don't come here to see you, my dear—which, between you and me, I think his duty."

"His duty !"

"You are old friends," said Miss Wrickerton. "Perhaps, if it were not for us, he would come to see you more often."

"Not he—not he !"

"And—"

But Miss Wrickerton's further observations were cut short by a knocking and ringing at the front door, and Avice felt her face flushing in a most unaccountable manner, and for no reason on earth, either. It was not likely that he would come to see her now. Besides, why should her face flush—even if it were he ?

And it was he—for the servant announced his name, as well as his daughter's, and he came in looking less grim than in office hours—perhaps with his best looks for company—but still stern, for all the set smile on his face.

"I told you that I would bring him," said Rosamond, with one of her old laughs, "and I have done so, despite his opposition."

"Not a selfish opposition, you will believe, ladies," he answered, as he greeted them, "and one not very rigidly sustained. I have resisted all the claims of a busy office to please my daughter."

"And Avice," added Rosamond.

"Ay, and Avice," repeated he, with a strange look. "Well, ward, I hope I see you in good health—'as it leaves me at present ?'"

"I am very well thank you," answered Avice, in not the firmest of tones.

"You will pardon me, Avice, if I take an old man's privilege, and do not compliment you," said he, "but I have seen a brighter face at Sanderstone."

"There are not many roses for the cheeks culled in London squares."

"True."

He dropped into a chair by her side, although for the next few minutes he addressed himself entirely to Miss Wrickerton. Mrs. Badge had, after a solemn reverence to Mrs. Hern, and a deeper one to Mr. Stanmore, stolen from the room.

Although Mr. Stanmore exclusively addressed himself to Miss Wrickerton, yet Avice felt his eyes were often fixed upon her face with an intense thoughtfulness that embarrassed her, and made her hardly conscious at times of all Rosamond was saying on her left.

"You return to-morrow?" said Avice, to Rosamond.

"Yes, at an early hour too—six in the morning from the railway station—it's a long journey for—baby."

"Baby—how is he?"

"I left him fast asleep in his little crib with the nurse by his side," said Rosamond.

"Where is Arnold this evening?"

"I—I don't know where he has gone *this* evening," murmured Rosamond.

"And Mr. Hern, senior?"

"He has gone to the theatre, I believe."

"Do you remember what your uncle's trade or profession was, years ago, Avice?" asked Rosamond after a pause.

Avice could have made a very good guess, but she only shook her head.

"He was a low kind of man at that period, was he not?" said Rosamond.

"He was a poor man, I should think," replied Avice, "and rather rough in his manners—but I was quite a child at that time."

"He is a little rough now," said Rosamond, "and yet, my dear Arnold is such a gentleman."

"Ah, yes!"

"One startles me by words I've never heard before, and—but I ought not to say anything against old Mr. Hern, for he is kind to me, and quite proud of his daughter, I assure you, Avvy dear."

"I am glad to hear that."

"So there is nothing to cross me with father-in-law, husband, or son—I have everything to make me happy—I said that I should always be very happy—with *him*, sister."

"You deserve to be."

"I don't know that," said Rosamond, reflectively.

"Not know it!" exclaimed Avice.

"I was an undutiful daughter," said Rosamond. "I disregarded him," looking at her father, "I cast a shadow on his whole life—he has never been the same man since I left him for my Arnold. And though—though I am very happy," she repeated, with that forced earnestness which overshot the mark intended, and gave rise to vague suspicions, "yet I sometimes think it was not for the best. I—I had better have broken my heart, and honoured my father!"

"My dear sister, you are not in good spirits to-night," said Avice; "you must not think of anything like this—you acted for the best; you acted as that heart—and it is a good one—prompted you."

"My heart was—but I will not think of it," cried Rosamond, "I will not believe that he is dull and lonely because I am—happy!"

As if tired of the argument or eager to shun it, she went and sat beside Miss Wrickerton, and entered into a lighter conversation. Mr. Stanmore turned to Avice.

"What has she been saying, Avice?" he asked. "That she is happy?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe it?" he inquired, in his low deep tones.

Avice hesitated to reply.

"Well, I will not press the question," he said, "the lightest observer could tell the depth of her happiness by the signs upon the surface. She has not told me much, and I have not asked, for her sake, how affairs are getting on at the Hall, but I know from others that they are

in a bad condition. The Hall itself will have to be sold."

"She thinks so."

"The sooner the better," he remarked; "the Herts are too fond of sporting, and of the revelry that comes after the chase, to make Rosamond's home a *happy* one."

He laid a stress upon the word.

"I—I hope that they are really happy," said Avise, half musingly.

"Whether they are or not, we are blameless," replied Stanmore; "the past was not to be remedied in the case of my daughter. It was one case in a thousand, for a girl's whole nature to be altered, and her whole hopes concentrated on an unworthy suitor. 'One case in a thousand!' did I say—I do not know that. There are many Rosamond Stanmores who look upon life as a romance, and the first young man they meet as the hero of it. We read a great deal in books, Avise, of sires opposed to daughters' marriages—of their rigour, their exaction, and the efforts they use to suppress the growth of true love, in the breasts of their children—for Heaven's sake! let us have some writers to take the other side of the question, not always the exception to the rule—not always turning giddy the heads of boarding school misses, and fashionable young ladies—not always making the father the evil genius of the story. Are there any young men in the world like those we read of in novels?"

"A few perhaps."

"Not one," firmly asseverated Stanmore, who was coming out of the ice, "ah! Avise, you don't know what young men are now-a-days—what their topics of conversation are when the door closes on the last skirt, and they are left together over their wine."

"You are too severe."

"Oh! I am not trying to convince you," he said, with a forced effort at pleasantry. "I shall leave you to your own opinion of nice young men. I am an old fellow, getting more crabbed and sour with every day—so my judgment may be a little spiteful—at all events it goes for nothing. Yet I wish there was a specific for impressionable young ladies, which would make them pause, deliberate, consider, weigh well the chances over and over again, take advice even of

that father who is the Nero of the Minerva press, ere they fall deeply in love with the face of the admirable hero. Oh ! if I could write a book."

"You speak as if you had never attempted authorship, Mr. Stanmore," said Avice, smiling.

"Do I not speak the truth ?"

"I saw a review of 'The State' the other day."

"'The State' is a different matter, and allows no moral essays and disquisitions," said he, "yes, 'The State' is published, and I have no harbour of refuge when my bad tempers steal over me."

Avice laughed.

"So you read the reviews still, Avice ?"

Avice coloured—she felt the old strange gaze fixed upon her, and she could not look up and face it.

"I have no occasion to study the opinions of the press," she answered.

"Not now !" he said, more to himself, than Avice.

After a long pause he went on—

"I hear Mr. Clifton has established a fair literary reputation—he is a fortunate young man."

"Mr. Clifton," cried Miss Wrickerton, catching at names, "what is he coming again, my dear Avice ?"

"Coming again !" echoed Stanmore, "has he been to this house—have you seen him lately ?"

He addressed Miss Wrickerton, but Avice felt the questions were intended for herself.

"Oh ! yes," said Miss Wrickerton, looking slyly at Avice, "we have seen a good deal of Mr. Clifton the last few months. He has called to see—*us* once or twice a week, and has brought his books of poetry for—*us* to read."

The invalid lady, satisfied that they were all true friends in that room, gave great point and meaning to her speech, and looked round for general applause at its conclusion. She was very much astonished at Mr. Stanmore's gloomy stare at the carpet, and thought she must have committed some hideous blunder which had offended him for life.

"Is the long—long quarrel over ?" cried Rosamond, "oh ! Avice, I shall be so glad—"

"Do not begin to congratulate me," interrupted Avice, "we

never quarrelled, so we have nothing to make up. Mr. Clifton only called—only called to say—”

She became confused as Mr. Stanmore's looks wandered from the carpet to her burning face; she did not know how to explain—how to convince them all that Edward Clifton was nothing to her, had been nothing since their engagement was ended in the summer of her love.

Mr. Stanmore did not relieve her perplexity in any great degree by asking a question of the hostess totally irrelevant to the subject, and that so abruptly that the good little lady gave a nervous jump in her chair, and ricked her back for the remainder of the evening.

For several minutes Mr. Stanmore did not address a word to Avice, he talked to Miss Wrickerton, to his daughter Rosamond in a hurried rattling manner, pausing for no reply, and paying no heed to one if it were hazarded; then he began to recover his equanimity, to wrap himself in that cold formal demeanour which was natural to him, and to finally return to a desultory conversation with Avice, which he managed to sustain during the remainder of the visit.

But notwithstanding all his commonplace discourse, and his kind respectful manner towards her, Avice knew that he was scarce conscious of what he was saying, and was thinking of all that had been spoken concerning Edward Clifton, and coupling her name and her old lover's together in his mind. She felt she would have given a great deal to convince him of the contrary; she did not like him to think that she was weak minded enough to fall in love with Edward Clifton again—she was almost angry with him for giving credit to the supposition for one instant.

But there he sat, striving hard to look like a man of business and a government secretary, and avoiding all recurrence to the subject as much for Avice's sake as his own.

Avice was really glad when Mr. Stanmore and Rosamond rose to depart.

“And you will come soon, Avvy dear,” said Rosamond. “I shall be expecting you every day, now Miss Wrickerton is gaining strength once more.”

“I hope to come before the winter sets in.”

"I shall persuade papa to accompany you," said Rosamond, glancing at her father, "to put away all those troublesome papers and dreary books; to leave business—oh! that business—and spend a few weeks at Sanderstone. Why, it will be the old days over again. You will come papa?"

"No, thank you, Rosamond," he answered, with a nervous twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Not till next summer, I think."

"But Avice will be with us."

"Avice will find a more fitting companion than I—a young man who—"

He checked himself as Avice, with a look of pain, turned away. When he shook hands with her, he murmured:

"That was a foolish speech of mine, Avice. Forgive me, and forget it."

"There is nothing to forgive."

"You do not wonder why I come so little to this house," he said in the same low tone. "You can see it is a better, wiser policy to stay at home and study hard than come to see you. You will believe I am not learning to forget you, *daughter?*"

Her hand was trembling as he relinquished it.

"Try and remember what I said about the ladies," he said, in a lighter tone. "It is as well to deliberate profoundly and not to dash madly at the flame when you feel the wings of love bearing you upwards. I always liked Clifton; I think he will make you a good husband, Avice."

"You do not believe—"

"There, there, not a word," hastily interrupted he. "God bless you both, and good-night!"

Father and daughter were gone. Mrs. Badge had come in, and after listening to a recital of the principal points of discourse, had dozed off in opposition to Miss Wrickerton, leaving Avice to draw her chair nearer to the table, to lean her elbows on it, to cover her face with her hands, after the old habit, and to sink a fathomless depth in the great sea of thought.

"What a funny way to go to sleep," said Martha Badge to Miss Wrickerton, as she struggled out of her nap

about an hour after the departure of the visitors. "That's how the dear child used to drop off when quite a little girl."

"I'm not asleep," said Avice, sitting back in her chair, and lowering her hands.

"Don't tell me that, Avice, with those great red eyes of yours," exclaimed Martha, laughing hoarsely. "Ladies never go to sleep, oh, no ! Why Miss Wrickerton and I have been a sitting here and watching you this last half hour and more !"

CHAPTER IV

SIGNS.

AVICE HERN went down to Sanderstone when Miss Wrickerton was better ; that was in the end of the last autumn month, when the roadways were full of golden leaves, and half the birds that had sung of summer were thousands of miles away, enjoying change of air and diet.

She had chosen a dismal time of year to visit the old place ; and it was a windy cheerless day that gave her welcome back to Sanderstone, as the stage-coach set her down at the "Bear" inn. There was no friend waiting to receive her ; it was to be a surprise at the Hall, and therefore Rosamond had had no warning of her coming.

Avice had looked forward to this long promised visit with no small anticipation ; but whether the dulness of the day, or the threatening signs of winter apparent on each feature of the landscape, or the memories which were conjured up at every tread, and all of which were more or less painful, served to depress her, it was at least evident that the little figure wending her way slowly along Sanderstone Road, was not in the best of spirits, and was going to see her friends with not the lightest heart in the world.

At a bend of the road near the Hall Avice came upon Arnold Hern, who was lounging against his own palings, and earnestly gazing at the distant gates of the avenue.

He leaped like one who had seen a ghost.

"What Miss Hern !" he cried, shaking hands violently with her, "this is a surprise. How glad Rosamond will be

to see you ! Why did you not tell us the day ? We would have had the carriage waiting for you at the railway station."

"I am fond of surprises," said Avice, taking the arm he offered her ; "and so I preferred a mysterious appearance. But I hope I am not taking you away from any engagement."

"Engagement !" said he, suddenly flushing up ; "what engagement do you think I could have on the king's highway ?"

"I thought you might have been waiting for some friends," remarked Avice.

"Not I," he answered. "My friends, if I have any, know where to find me. No, I only came for a stroll, and to enjoy my cigar."

"Rosamond and the baby are quite well, I hope."

"Oh ! they are getting on very well now," said Arnold. "The little chap has a deuce of a cough, certainly ; but nothing for Rosamond to worry herself to death about. Good Heavens ! how she worries about that child !"

"She is a loving tender mother," said Avice.

"Ah ! yes, a trifle too much so," yawned Arnold. "We'd better stop at the lodge, and tell Millthorn to send some one for your boxes."

"There is only one."

"I hope not symbolical of a short stay ?"

"A week."

"Nonsense !"

"Ah ! you will get quite tired of my methodical ways in one week, Mr. Arnold."

They were at the lodge ; and Millthorn came out to unlock the gates. He immediately recognised Avice.

"Well, Millthorn, I have come to see Sanderstone again."

"That's right, Miss."

"How is your wife and Katie ?"

"Both well and hearty, Miss Hern, thank'ee," said he, unlocking the gates. "I hope I may say the same of you."

"Anybody been ?" asked Arnold, before Avice could reply.

"No, Sir."

"Keep a sharp look out," he muttered in a low tone.

"All right, Sir."

After a few words concerning Avice's box at the "Bear" inn, they strolled leisurely up the avenue.

"We have made Millthorn lodge-keeper, Miss Avice," said Arnold. "We thought the place would suit him."

"He is trustworthy. But who is this girl coming from the Hall?—Surely it is Katie."

"Yes," replied Arnold, carelessly, "it's our lodge-keeper's daughter."

"How pretty she has grown."

"Do you think so?"

Katie approached them with downcast eyes and blushing face. As Avice and her companion stopped, she made a quick, low curtsy, and murmured the name of "Miss Hern."

"Why Katie, what a young woman you have grown!"

"So they tell me, Miss Hern," she answered, looking on the ground. "I—I am glad you have come to see us all again."

There were a few more words exchanged, but the girl appeared to have assumed a bashful reserved manner towards Avice, which struck her as singular. There she stood, shyly averting her head, and colouring at each word addressed to her.

When Katie had left them, which she did with a rapidity that told her position had been an embarrassed and constrained one, Avice remarked upon her taciturnity, to which Arnold replied,

"That he had heard she was a shy girl, but he did not take much notice of the people about the house. He supposed the sudden surprise of meeting Avice had upset the little intellect of which she had to boast."

"There's Rosamond," said Arnold, pointing to one of the windows, "she has given the child to the nurse, and is coming to meet you."

The front door opened suddenly, and Rosamond came running down the avenue with outstretched arms.

"Oh! my dear, dear Avvy, I am so glad—I am so glad!" cried she, flinging her arms round the neck of Avice.

"But you are very thoughtless to come into this cold air without a bonnet or shawl, sister," said Avice, as she embraced her; "there, let us get into the house as fast as we can."

"And tell one another all your state secrets, and get them over by the time I come back to dinner," said Arnold, as he wheeled round and retraced his steps down the avenue.

"That is the best thing we can do, Rosamond," said Avice, "and then we shall be better company for the Messrs. Hern."

When they were in Rosamond's own room, and Avice had disencumbered herself of her travelling gear, the baby was brought in and placed in its mother's arms.

Avice felt a chilling sensation in every vein as she looked at the child in Rosamond's lap—the boy had altered even in the little time since she had seen him last, he had grown more thin, and white, and his great, blue eyes were more earnestly than ever looking at some objects far away—perhaps, far away in Heaven!

"He don't grow much," said Rosamond, stooping over the infant and kissing him, "but I think that he is getting stronger. Oh! he is getting such a dear quiet boy."

"Arnold tells me that he has a cough."

"Yes, that frightens me sometimes," said Rosamond; "it seems to shake his tiny frame so—but all children have coughs, you know."

"Yes—certainly," murmured Avice.

"Sometimes I amuse myself by fancying how I shall dress him when he is a year or two older," said Rosamond, "and what a handsome boy he will be then!"

"You must not dwell too much upon the child," said Avice, tenderly; "you must not set your whole heart—your every thought, on this dear infant, Rosamond, it would not be right."

"I cannot help it," replied Rosamond; "I understand what you mean, Avice; the doctor said something to the same effect, but I must love my little Arnold here with all my heart, though life is uncertain at the best. Yet, yet I do not think he will be struck down of all the world, my only one, my darling!"

Avice looked at the fire as Rosamond went on—

"I have one fear though, and it is a terrible one—if I should die—if God should take me from my husband and my child, before the child grows up—what would become of him—who would love him for his mother's sake?"

"I would."

"You will promise me that," cried Rosamond, eagerly; "you will take him away for a few years—they will let you, I know—you will bring him up a good boy—you will teach him not to forget his mother—you will—"

"My dear, dear Rosamond," cried Avice, "this is drawing a very gloomy picture for no reason upon earth. You, please God, have many years of life before you; why torture yourself with unnecessary fears?"

"I don't know," answered Rosamond; "I have a host of curious ideas that keep swarming to my poor head; and I'm not strong. I tease Arnold with my weary looks sometimes. I cannot account for all this—for I am very happy!"

"You have Katie still in your service."

"Yes."

"I see Millthorn is your lodge-keeper."

"Yes."

It was some time before Avice could draw Rosamond to a lighter train of thought, and it was quite dark before they were chatting about Miss Mistleford's grand marriage, and the progress of affairs at the Hall itself.

"We shall leave here in the summer, Avvy," said Rosamond. "I believe everything is settled. I wish we were coming to London to live near you and father."

"London air would not agree with you, Rosamond."

"I think it would—but Arnold the little," smiling at the baby in her lap, "might object to it. So we must keep a hundred miles away from the noisy Babel. Do you remember me one day speaking to you, Avice, about Mr. Walter Hern being rough at times?"

"Yes, dear."

"He is not half so boisterous now," said Rosamond, "although I regret to say he has become very weak and nervous; his losses seem to have preyed upon him, and he has got thoughtful, and is occasionally strange in the extreme. I tell you this, Avice, in order that his manner may not surprise you during your stay here."

Dinner was soon afterwards announced, and the baby having been transferred to the arms of his nurse, and Avice having kissed him, and wished him good-night, they repaired to the dining-room.

Walter Hern, who was really glad to welcome Avice to the Hall, pressed both the hands of his niece in his rough palms, and hoped that she had come to make a long stay, and cheer the lot of them up a bit, for upon their souls they wanted it—didn't they, Rosamond?

Walter Hern had begun to look old—he had given way

at last, his broad coarse-looking face was full of furrows, and his moustache had changed to a dirty grey hue, and was certainly not an attractive ornament to his upper lip.

Arnold entered as the head of the house was shaking hands with Avice, and completed the family party.

"We won't be at home to a soul to-night, Arnold boy," said Walter Hern; "you hear that, John?" to the servant hovering in attendance.

"Yes, Sir."

"We'll have a quiet evening, and Avice shall sing us Auld lang syne.' By Jove!" cried Hern, "I've almost forgotten what a quiet evening's like."

"Like a grave," said Arnold.

"Are you still a lover of society, Mr. Arnold?" asked Avice.

"I like a friend or two," said Arnold. "I hope there's no sin in that, Miss Avice?"

"What's the matter, Arnold?" asked Walter, looking up from his plate, "anything wrong?"

"Is anything right?" was the sullen reply.

"Very little," said Walter, "but come, young fellow, you mustn't be out of temper to-night—just for once now."

"Well! 'begone dull care,'" cried Arnold; "you shall see what a model gentleman I'll be this evening—Miss Hern, I shall have great pleasure in drinking wine with you."

Arnold was quite an amiable young man for the remainder of the evening, and when he and his father had joined Rosamond and Avice in that drawing-room to which they paid such few and far between visits, they were quite gallants in their attention, and Rosamond with Arnold by her side really looked—happy!

The evening soon passed, and they were exchanging good-nights, and talking of a long ride on horseback for the morrow.

"Don't go, Avice," said Walter Hern. "I want a little talk with you, if you have no particular objection."

Avice looked surprised, but readily gave consent.

"Family matters, my boy," said he to Arnold, "you need not stare so. I suppose uncle and niece may have a chat together without everybody opening eyes and mouth—ho! ho! ho!"

After Arnold and Rosamond had retired, Walter Hern

drew his chair nearer the fire, and looked hard at Avico.

"Have you any objection to my smoking?" said Hern, drawing a meerschaum pipe from his pocket; "it's very rude and vulgar, I know, but I can't get on without my pipe."

"Oh! do not mind me, Mr. Hern," replied Avico. "I have no objection."

Hern lighted his pipe, and after a few minutes' contemplation of the fire, said:

"Do you know, Avico, although we haven't seen much of each other, or been very good friends in our time, yet I never feel the same to you as I do to other people. You put me always in mind of brother Jem. Poor Jem was a good sort of fellow in his way, Avico. I suppose you hardly remember him, girl?"

"I shall ever remember him," said Avico, the tears coming into her eyes.

"Well, I don't mind for the reason of our relationship," said Hern, biting hard at the amber mouth-piece of his pipe, "letting you know how affairs are getting on here. Why, Avico, I'm blest if we haven't got to the end of Dick's money—what a heap it was!—and are going very comfortably to the dogs."

This affecting confession so overcame him, that he drew the pipe from his mouth, and wiped his eyes.

"Going to the dogs!" said he, shaking his head, gravely, "debts coming in on all sides, and a mortgage about to smash us to the devil—beg pardon, girl, but consider the feelings of a ruined man, and make allowance for his indignation."

"I am sorry to hear of your losses."

"So am I," said Walter, with his drowsy look fixed upon the fire; "and I hear of fresh ones every day. Now there's Arnold; he's no more considerate than if he had just stepped into another legacy. When the Hall comes to the hammer it will be almost the death of him."

"The change will be better for him."

"Eh!" said Walter, "how's that?"

"When he finds his friends fall off in his adversity, he will become a better husband perhaps."

"You think he's a bad one?"

"Rosamond says not," replied Avice, "but I have my doubts."

"Humph ! don't understand these things much, and certainly don't trouble my head about the matter," said he ; "but what I wanted to ask you was—for there's no understanding Rosamond—do you think Stanmore would lend me a few thousands ? I shouldn't like to ask and be said 'No, thank'ee ' to, you see."

"I do not think he would," answered Avice.

Walter Hern began to puff hard at his pipe, and to stare more intently at the fire.

"Why not ?" he asked at last.

"Because he would believe in no good result arising from such a loan," said Avice. "It would only be postponing the evil day a month or two."

"Do you think he would have any objection to lending Arnold's wife the money ?"

"That would be the same thing," said Avice. "But why ask me concerning this ? I cannot answer for Mr. Stanmore. I can only give you my ideas upon the question."

"They'll do ; for you know his ways, Avice," said Walter ; "so let it drop, and good-bye to the Hall. I shan't write to Stanmore, as you think it's of no use. We shall find a cottage big enough for us, I dare say. I don't mind a bit ; but Arnold."

"Better men than Arnold Hern have borne a change for the worse."

"You don't seem to care much about *us*, Avice," said he. "You take it coolly enough, considering our relationship."

"I believe you will all be the better for the change," said Avice, "and I am sure Rosamond will be the happier."

Walter Hern maundered on about his affairs and his Arnold boy, and his Arnold boy's boy. "They wouldn't any of them be worth a single rap ! The Hall was done for out and out." He got very low-spirited at last ; and after getting through another pipe, he bade Avice good-night, and went crying to bed.

When he had gone, Avice sat and thought about the Hall, and her uncle's prospects ; wondering if her little fortune would do any good, or but be engulfed in the great vortex, and finally arriving at the conclusion that there was no help to be offered, and that in fact help would postpone the evil

day a short while at the best—perhaps be postponing the future happiness of Rosamond Hern likewise.

Would Arnold Hern reform when his friends fell off and left him father, wife and child for companions? It was doubtful what would reform Arnold. His nature was all fits and starts. He would probably find little sweetness in "the uses of adversity."

Avice rang the bell for the maid, and Katie promptly responded to the summons.

"Katie!" exclaimed Avice, "are you to be my lady's maid?"

"If you please, Miss Hern."

"Then show me the way to my room, Katie; for I am very tired."

Katie Millthorn led the way along the passages of that great mansion, and up the broad staircase to a prettily furnished room on the first floor.

"I am not used to a lady's maid at home, Katie," said Avice, as she seated herself before the looking glass. "I am not too grand a lady to wait upon myself, but you and I are old friends, and have had many a long chat together."

"Thanks to your kindness, Miss Hern," said Katie, as she began arranging the luxuriant masses of black hair, "to that kindness which I never saw in anybody else. Ah! how we have missed you many a long day."

Katie was no longer shy and reserved, but went on in her usual rambling manner. Avice sat watching her in the glass. Katie had grown a tall young woman, with a bright, handsome face that would have been perfect in itself, had it not been for the unsteady light of the eyes, which gave now and then a wild and vacant expression to the whole countenance.

"I am sure, Katie, your mistress is very kind to you."

"God bless her!" cried the girl, "that she is; but then it's in a different way like—like—I don't know what like exactly."

"Are you Mrs. Hern's maid?"

"Yes," replied Katie, "she is good enough to put up with me."

"Do you like service?"

"Very much," answered Katie. "They're all so kind to me, every one of them—from the grooms even to—Master Arnold."

She paused before she uttered the last name, and Avice's keen black eyes, which were steadily fixed upon her reflection in the glass, detected a rising blush on Katie's face.

Avice sat silent and grave, but with a strange beating at the heart. Here was a new-born suspicion gaining ground with the remembrance of the incident in the avenue, and Katie's evident embarrassment, of Arnold waiting in Sanderstone Road, perhaps for that girl! of Arnold turning back when Rosamond came out to meet her "sister."

God forgive her for this cruel suspicion, based upon no valid evidence, and yet growing strong within her each instant as she sat there! God forgive her if she was wrong in probing the depths of that weak mind, in seeking for some further clue. She did not do it for vulgar curiosity, for no love of scandal or of mischief, but for her sister's sake—her sister who was so happy!

"Mr. Arnold is a fine young man," said Avice, musingly.

"Ay, he is," eagerly responded the girl, "as handsome a man as ever trod shoe-leather in Sanderstone."

"He is kind, too!"

Avice could not make this observation without flushing herself. It seemed all underhanded and crafty.

"That he is," said Katie. "People used to say he was passionate, and so he is at times; but never to me. As for being proud, why he is not too proud to stop and talk his nonsense about my braw looks if I meet him about the house or out o'doors."

"And flatters you like the rest of the gentlemen?"

"He calls me his sweetheart," said the girl, with the rosy colour mounting upwards. "He has always a joke for a lass and a smile for her."

"You met him to-day?"

"Yes," said the girl, "he overtook me; he was walking so fast! He is a very fast walker, Miss Hern."

The innocent, half-childish way in which this was said reassured Avice.

"You should not talk too much to gentlemen who call you sweetheart, Katie," said Avice. "You should not let them meet you too often for your own good name's sake."

"Mr. Arnold is my master; he's a kind man," said Katie; "and as for sweetheart, it's only his joke. Why, he's a married man."

"Ay."

"Did you speak, Miss?"

"How should you like to go to London, Katie?" asked Avice, suddenly.

"To London, Miss?"

"Yes, with me, and be my lady's maid, and see me every day. Is that a great inducement, or a little one?"

"Oh! Miss—with you—London!"

"Will you think of it?"

"You mean to leave them all?"

"For a time."

"I should have gone mad once with the joy of thinking about it, but——"

"But what?"

"I don't know—I don't know," cried Katie, with the tears in her great eyes. "I feel very wicked not to thank you—not to say that I will go with you to the world's end."

"Will you think of it and let me know?" said Avice. "Will you keep this a secret between ourselves until I give you leave to speak? Will you try and think how happy we should be together, you and I, and how I hope you will let me ask your father and mother's consent to take you home with me?"

"I'll try and do it all," cried Katie. "Yes, yes, I'll go—I must want to go with you, only I feel strange, like, now!"

"You will give me an answer to-morrow or the next day?"

"Thank you, lady; yes—oh! yes, yes."

"Then go to bed and think it over," said Avice. "There, that will do, Katie; I can manage without you now. Good-night."

"Good-night, Miss Hern. I'll think of it. I shan't sleep for thinking of it, and which ever way it is——"

"Ah! do not decide hastily," cried Avice. "You cannot imagine how sorry I shall be if you refuse the offer I have made you—how very, very grieved!"

"You—you will?" exclaimed the wondering girl.

"Yes."

"Don't grieve, Miss Hern—it shall be right. Don't grieve."

She lightly kissed the hand extended to her and darted out of the room, coming back along the passage a minute

afterwards, to tap against the panel of the door, and to repeat in a low voice, "Don't grieve for me; it's almost wicked; good-night, lady; good-night."

"Good-night," said Avice, as her footsteps stole away again.

"Oh! Arnold, Arnold!" cried Avice, standing in the middle of the room with her hands clasped together, and shaking her head sorrowfully at an imaginary Arnold Hern before her. "So bad as this! so weak of purpose, so wicked in your nature, so faithless in your oath to God as to seek the abasement of this poor witless one! Is there no memory of the fair girl you followed so perseveringly for a reproach?—no vision of wife or child warning you back and bidding you have more command over your evil nature—more common respect even to yourself?"

She paused and then went on again.

"I have not come in vain," she said. "I shall have done good if I take Katie back with me. I shall have silently defended my dear sister, and spared her a cruel, cruel blow. I shall foil you, Arnold Hern, I feel I shall," she cried, brandishing her brave little arm. "I shall have Right to battle against Wrong, and Right shall be the victor in the contest; it always is—it shall be for ever and for ever! Oh! married life, how soon the romance dies out, and how soon the bloom is brushed away! How glad am I that I am cut out for an old maid! that I shall be spared all the heart-burnings which follow the wedding ring upon the finger! that I shall never be married—never, never, never!"



CHAPTER V

AVICE HERN TO THE RESCUE!

EARLY the next morning Avice began her silent attack on the outposts, with the intention of undermining the enemy by slow and sure degrees.

Before breakfast, and ere the Herns had descended from their rooms, Avice was gently tapping at the lodge-keeper's door.

"Save us, is it you, Miss Hern?" exclaimed Mrs. Millthorn, as she stood in the door-way. "I thought it was Katie with a message from the 'house.' Will you be kind enough to walk in, lady?"

Avice complied and found Millthorn at his breakfast. The sturdy lodge-keeper made his clumsy reverence, and hoped that she was well that morning.

"Pray go on with your breakfast," said Avice, "or I shall think that I am a great intruder. You must not mind me—you used not, if you recollect."

"We recollect, Miss; it is not likely that we shall ever forget," replied Mrs. Millthorn.

"No, no, not we," added Millthorn, "perhaps if it's not asking too great a favour, you will take a cup with us—you have done that before now, in old times, Miss."

"Certainly I will," said Avice, "for I mean to have a long gossip with you this morning, and, in fact, I have a serious proposition to make to both of you."

Millthorn and his wife looked surprised, but waited for Avice to continue.

When they were seated at the breakfast table, and Millthorn, with a faint idea of etiquette, was scolding his mouth in an attempt to gulp down hot coffee from his cup—a feat he had never before attempted—Avice began.

"Your Katie has grown a handsome young woman, Mrs. Millthorn."

"Yes, thank God, Miss," said the mother, brightening with pleasure. "She's got over all her old complaints and is a fine lass."

"There's one thing she'll never get over, Miss Hern," said Millthorn.

"And that?"

"Is her old want," tapping his forehead with his brown forefinger. "At times she's more a child than a woman. You'd think she was about eight years old or so; but she has improved, mind you—hasn't she, Bess?" turning to his wife.

"Ah! that she has," said the wife, "and I pray night and day for her—I think it makes her better."

"She likes service at the Hall?"

"Very much, lady."

"I wish she would change it for service in a more quiet family."

"Indeed, Miss."

"I think there is too much excitement at the Hall," said Avice, "and Katie appears to me to be suffering from it."

"You don't mean that!" cried Millthorn, staring intently at his guest.

"I said so," said Mrs. Millthorn, "I've all'us told him so, but he has laughed and made his fun about it. Now p'raps he'll believe me."

Millthorn made no reply, but took refuge in his cup of coffee.

"I wish you would let me as a very, very great favour," said Avice, coming suddenly to the point, "take her to London with me, and make her my own maid. It would be a hard task to part with your child, and your only one—but I feel assured it would be so much the better for Katie than remaining where she is. I am convinced that she will never be well at Sanderstone."

"You're, you're very kind," stammered Millthorn, "but, but—take her away to Lunnun! You're kind, but—Bess?" and he looked at his wife inquiringly.

Mrs. Millthorn sat with her face averted, her grave looks bent upon the sanded floor, and her nervous fingers fidgeting at the corners of her apron.

"We don't know what might happen," said Mrs. Millthorn after a long pause. "Katie may soon be out of place, you know. It's a brave offer of the lady, Jem—it's an offer from her own good heart. Katie would be better off with Miss Hern!"

"Ah! we don't know what may happen, that's true," said Millthorn, "but to let the gal go all those awful miles—right away to Lunnun!"

"She shall come and see you once or twice a year."

"A year!" dolefully responded Millthorn.

"When you like," said Avice, earnestly; "but I hope for your child's sake you do not intend to throw any obstacle in the way, Millthorn."

Mrs. Millthorn gave a searching glance at Avice, and then looked on the floor again, and fidgeted once more with the apron.

"I'll leave it to the old woman," said Millthorn, rising, "she knows best what's best, you see. It's very kind of

you, and thank'ee. It's more than kind of you, Miss Hern, and—thank'ee. We don't know what may happen, true enough ! ”

He took his fur cap down from a peg near the door, and said in conclusion—

“ I'll leave it all to Bess. She'll manage it right enough which ever way you settle it, and it's very kind of you, Miss Hern, and—thank'ee from the heart.”

And more than a trifle bewildered, Millthorn shut the door behind him, and went into the avenue.

When he had been gone about a minute, Mrs. Millthorn drew her chair closer to our heroine's and said :

“ You know about the Hall, that some day it may be sold ? ”

“ Yes,” said Avice.

“ That Millthorn watches the gates for fear of bailiffs and that like ? ”

“ I did not know that—but—”

“ Then,” interrupted the woman, “ you can see my daughter will soon be out of place. Is it for that you come to me like a Christian, and say I will give Katie a home ? ”

“ I think Katie will make a good lady's maid,” Avice replied, evasively.

“ Was it for more than that ? ” said the woman earnestly. “ Was it for a better, more merciful reason still ? If so, God bless you ! bless you, lady ! more than a mother fearing for her child can, although she does bless you too with all her soul.”

Avice essayed to speak, but the woman went on—

“ You see that Katie is in danger, I'm sure you do,” cried Mrs. Millthorn ; “ that same fear has been whitening my hair and burning at my brain for months. Oh ! lady, lady ! we hear of the evils of the city, over there,” waving her hand in a vague direction, “ but they are nothing like those in a country village, if those high in place fear not the Bible laws. What can we do but starve, if we say a word to those great people who employ us ? What would Jem have done, if I had told him Katie was too beautiful, too weak in mind and thought to be up at the Hall ? he would have been forced to say ‘ It can't be helped—I mustn't lop my right hand off for her sake ; ’ or, he would have met the young master one of these days in his mad fits, and shot him dead.”

"You see it will be better for Katie to return with me," urged Avice.

"Yes, yes, a hundred-fold the better way," cried the mother, with the tears running down her furrowed cheeks. "I don't know how to thank you—I can't thank you—I haven't thanks enough! It isn't for giving her a home, it isn't for remembering us after all these years; but for snatching her from danger—she who was nothing to you—it's there I feel it! Miss Hern, you are a good woman to busy yourself about the troubles of the poor."

"Are they not all alike in His sight?"

"Ay!" responded the woman, "but who tells us that but the minister, and who tries to prove it so?—not him. It was a fair day that brought you down to Sanderstone, Miss Hern."

"My fears may have exaggerated the danger," said Avice, "for I have judged chiefly from Katie's own manner."

"He flatters her; he meets her in his walks—he tells her how handsome she is," said the woman. "There's danger in a master telling a servant that—there's cruelty, there's wrong intended. Oh! he's a bad young man. He will do a good thing, now and then; but he has no thought, no care—he has the devil in his brain, which sets him going on like mad. P'raps the sorrow that's coming will do him good."

"I hope so."

"He will have much of it, Miss," said she, sinking her voice. "He will have much of it, leaving alone the Hall, and all about that, you know."

"What do you mean?"

"When he looks upon his dead baby he may have other thoughts," said she. "When he sees what a young wife they take away to the graveyard, he may be sorry for many things that's gone and past."

"Oh! don't talk like that," almost shrieked Avice. "Don't think that such distress, such horror will fall to his lot and ours."

"It's not to be helped thinking on about," said the woman, shaking her head. "You know what Miss Rosamond Stanmore was, and what young Mr. Hern is. You can see how she is falling away, away, away. It only wants her baby's death to kill her, I'm afraid."

"God forbid!" said Avice, with a shudder.

"What do the doctors come so often for? She's all'us ill—they're both all'us ill—mother and baby!"

"I did not know Mrs. Hern was under medical attendance," remarked Avice.

"She's been for a long, long while now; but she don't complain, poor thing! She's one of the angels upon earth, and so too good for it," said Mrs. Millthorn. "She sees no harm, she thinks the world all like her own heart, or yourn."

The latch was raised, the door opened, and Katie came slowly in. She started when she observed her mother's visitor, and stood hesitating in the middle of the room.

"Come in, Katie," said Mrs. Millthorn, "we have been talking about you."

"About my going?" she murmured.

"Yes, Katie."

"I came to tell you, mother, and to ask you whether you could bear to part with me," said Katie. "I—I did not think you could."

"I can trust you with Miss Hern, Katie," replied the mother. "I think London would suit you, Katie—such fine sights, such beautiful buildings, such carriages! The Queen lives in London, Katie!"

The mother went on in this strain some minutes as if talking to a child; but Katie's eyes sparkled not at Mrs. Millthorn's glowing descriptions, and were still bent in the one direction, at her feet.

"Katie has almost given me her promise," said Avice to Mrs. Millthorn.

"Did I?" Katie cried suddenly. "Yes, yes, so I did. Well, I'll go, if mother and father *can* bear to part with me."

"We could bear anything for your good, my child."

"Miss Hern," said Katie, "when you used to come to our house in the Black Hollow, you taught me never to tell a lie."

"I would not unteach you for the world, Katie."

"Then I will not say this moment I shall be glad to leave the Hall," said she; "for I find it very hard to think of going. I know them all so well, and they are all so kind. I—I wonder whether *he* will say anything when I tell him you are going to take me off to London."

"You must not tell him yet," said Avice. "You must

leave it to me to communicate the news on the day we bid the Hall good-bye."

"Not tell him! and he so—good to me," cried Katie. "Would he not say that I was an ungrateful girl after all his notice of me?—me he calls his favourite?"

"Miss Hern knows best," broke in the mother; "you are not to tell him."

"Why not?"

"Suppose he was to quarrel with me, Katie," said Avice, embracing an idea that fortunately suggested itself, "to say that I had no right to take you away, and that he would never speak to me again, or let his wife and my old play-fellow come to see me, what a deal of misery it would cause for nothing!"

Katie appeared to reflect. She had never considered the result in that light before.

"I wonder why I feel so miserable," she said, "and Miss Hern to take this great interest in me, too! You told me that you would grieve very much if I stayed here?"

"Yes, Katie."

"Then I'll go—for once and all, I'll go," said Katie, brightening up. "I shall be very happy when I'm right away. It's only the thought of going that makes me feel so heavy like. I'll do as you bid. I won't tell a soul about it. I am very much obliged to you for thinking that I shall make you a good maid. I'll try to be one—you may be sure of that, Miss Hern."

Katie seeming inclined to linger with her mother, probably to give way to an outburst of tears, after Miss Hern's departure—for her eyes were swimming and unsteady—Avice rose, and Mrs. Millthorn followed her to the door, repeating her inability to express those thanks which she deserved, and had a right to claim.

"It is a common, simple act of mine," said Avice, when Mrs. Millthorn had carefully closed the door behind her, and excluded Katie from their conference, "and you must not judge too highly of it. I may not be that true Christian you suppose. I may have thought more of the honour due to Mrs. Hern than of poor Katie's danger; I may have—"

"Don't say another word, lady. You cannot in any way or shape make this action anything but good. I know it is;

and He," said the woman solemnly, "knows it too, and will never forget it, Miss Hern."

Avice murmured a few inarticulate words, and hurried away, leaving Mrs. Millthorn shading her eyes with her sun-burnt hand, and gazing after her.

"There goes the best woman in the world," said the enthusiastic wife of the lodge-keeper. "She ought to be a queen, or something great as she is good. What a little thing she is, too! It's very strange all the good people are so small. I can't make it out exactly!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST EFFORT.

"ROSAMOND dear, how should you like to part with Katie?"

"Part with Katie, Avice!"

"Yes, to let me have her for a maid—to take her to London when I go away next Thursday."

"How very strange!" said Rosamond. "Will you tell me, dear, what makes you think of taking Katie?"

"Have you not told me the Hall will shortly be sold; and must not the greater number of domestics be dismissed?" said Avice. "Why should I not rescue Katie, and take her into my service?"

"You are very kind," murmured Rosamond; "but I did not intend to part with Katie. She is a gentle, willing girl."

"I should like her with me," said Avice. "I should like a face from Sanderstone to remind me of old times."

"If she will go with you, dearest," said Rosamond, "of course I shall have no objection. You must be very lonely sometimes, heigho!"

Avice took no notice of the sigh.

"It is not for me to begrudge you Katie, Avice," added Rosamond. "I can well understand your wish to take her with you. Have you spoken to her on the subject?"

"Yes," answered Avice; "and she seems inclined to accompany me."

"The thoughts of London are bewildering to a country

girl," said Rosamond. "She has glowing dreams of what the great city is like. What a contrast the reality must be to her ! Ah ! what a contrast the reality is to everything !"

This dialogue occurred some four or five days after Avice Hern had won over to her side Millthorn and his wife. She had skilfully elaborated her plans, and was now ready to draw the sword and declare war against Arnold Hern, if that gentleman should have the courage to come into the field. Now that the consent of Rosamond was gained, Avice felt quite secure of her new maid. She devoted half an hour every evening to Katie in her dressing-room, reciting to her descriptions of London, and of the bustling gay world it was, telling her how happy they should be together, too, till the girl's old passionate love for Miss Hern—"the good young lady," came slowly stealing back.

They were dull days at the Hall, despite every one's effort to please Avice. Even the long ride on horseback was a failure ; for first the little son's and then the mother's indisposition prevented the "sister" from accompanying Avice ; and it was a tedious morning with Arnold Hern and his father for companions.

Moreover, Avice could not shake off the remembrance of the half prediction of Mrs. Millthorn—could not but see how dreadfully ill both mother and son were looking, and how great was the effort of Rosamond to remind her in all she did and said, of the girl who had been her dearest, best of friends in the old time gone away for ever—the same girl, only so much happier !

Avice felt they were all assuming unnatural characters to deceive her. She was conscious of the deep thoughts beneath the forced free-and-easy manner of Walter Hern, of his gloomy reveries, and his fits of repentance concerning the money he had freely spent, of his nervous, absent manner, and of his attempts to disguise it by repeated attention to the brandy and wine decanters. Then there was Arnold, from whom her pure nature recoiled, affecting the gentleman and man of honour, Arnold perfectly heedless in his selfishness of what hearts he was breaking.

There was no refuge from all these in the company of old friends. Mrs. Clifton had been no friend of Avice's since the study-door of Edward Clifton was left unlocked years ago, and although she called at the Shrubbery, and spent a

morning with the duchess, it was not a pleasant morning—far from it. Miss Mistleford she had never particularly liked, and she was far away now, and a great lady; and old Mr. Mistleford had conspired against her guardian, and got a husband for her guardian's daughter.

The other occupants of the villas scattered about Sanderstone had been merely acquaintances met by chance at a friend's house once or twice a year.

So she devoted her sole attention to the married couple at the Hall, and studied to bring them more together. She sought to fan the flame of love which burned so fitfully in the truant heart of the husband, by speaking of all the reminiscences which struck home—of those times before he married her, and when his good angels had not quite abandoned him.

It was painful to see his better self leap up for a moment and strive for the mastery beneath the skilful mediation of Avice—to hear her recall the past romance of his life, till his dark eyes softened, his arm fell lightly round the waist of his wife, and the heavy look about his brow was smoothed away—to see the light flame up and then fade out on the arrival of the fox-hunting squires, the boisterous companions who came to spend a night with Arnold—the jolliest and best of fellows in all Sanderstone!

Avice made her last effort the evening before she went back to London, made it whilst Rosamond was in the nursery, and Walter Hern was taking his customary nap after dinner in an adjoining room. She began it by mentioning Katie to him for the first time, and her intention of taking the girl back with her.

"I suppose Rosamond has told you," said Avice, in conclusion.

Rosamond had informed him late one evening after his return from a dinner party, and the revelation had been listened to without his receiving the slightest idea of the matter in question; consequently he looked up and exclaimed—

"Katie—take Katie—you don't mean that?"

"It is all arranged," said Avice quietly, "I require a maid and you can spare one from the many, Mr. Arnold."

He did not answer, but stared intently at the fire.

"Katie and I are old friends," added she.

"Yes, no doubt," he said; "but are you aware, Avice, that Rosamond is much attached to her?"

Avice met the look he fixed upon her with such a steady pair of black piercing eyes, that the colour mounted to his face, and he made a hasty change in his position.

"Rosamond has sacrificed her attachment to Katie for her attachment to her sister Avice—I hope you do not object?"

"I!" with a short laugh. "It does not matter to me—why should it?"

"Katie is Rosamond's own maid—is she not?"

"Yes."

"Then I have no compunction in robbing her from Rosamond."

"I understand you not," he said, moodily.

Avice had also no compunction in sharply probing the thick skin of Arnold Hern, she felt that he could not know or dread too much for the sake of his young wife. If she could but arouse in him a sense of fear for Rosamond—and what fear was there not?—it might bring an antidote to his evil nature even with its bitterness. Therefore she answered—

"Rosamond is far from well—she requires a more experienced attendant than Katie—an older woman."

"Rosamond is only a trifle weak or so," said Arnold. "I hate old women!"

"My sister's weakness is no trifle, Arnold Hern," said Avice, seriously; "you are too quick to believe her protestations—you do not judge for yourself, or like a husband."

"A physician came twice last week and said that she was getting on very well now."

"Is he coming again?"

"Not till he is sent for."

"That may not be long, Mr. Arnold," said Avice. "I fear it will be very, very soon."

She had aroused him, for he hastily raised his head and looked at her anxiously.

"You really think that she's ill?"

"More ill than she will ever confess."

"She would tell me?"

"She tells you that she is happy!"

"And is she not?" he asked peremptorily.

"No," cried Avice, warming with the subject, "what

happiness is there for the wife when the husband slights her for his false friends' society ; when he never studies her lightest wish, but goes recklessly along the path he has tracked out for himself ? It is some one's place to tell you more than this—and I will tell it ! I wish it were a dearer friend than I, one from whom you would more readily take counsel ; but your friends deceive you, and you are blind to danger."

Arnold had never beheld Avice thawed from the natural reserve of her demeanour, the true heroine starting forth from the prim methodical little maid, with her quiet ways and sober smiles. As she went on, his fierce impetuous nature seemed to shrink away, and leave him cowering from her glances, and every musical word struck some chord within him which had not vibrated since his marriage. He did not feel roused to opposition by any sense of anger—all his passion appeared to have died for the moment, all his haughtiness and supreme contempt of rule to be lacking in defence—he could but cower more and more, and shade his face from her with his hands, or turn right away and stare at the hollow burning fire.

"Do you know what neglect is to Rosamond, that sensitive girl, only fit for a life strewn with rose leaves ?—it is a deadly poison for which there is no cure. And you, you, Arnold, who swore to love her till God laid His hand between you and took one or the other to the grave, have held that poison to her lips and been her murderer ! Ask your own conscience, what you have done to make her happy ; what study, wish of her young life has been your own ; what share of her hopes has been yours ; what effort you have made to keep your marriage vow ? You loved her once, you know you loved her very dearly, Arnold—it was a wild passionate affection, but still it made you a better man, and sowed within your heart those seeds of reformation, which have never flowered in the light."

Arnold writhed upon his chair, and made some faint gestures with his hands implying silence, which Avice heeded not.

"When she—your wife, gives one of those sickly smiles—a hideous contrast to the old look all sunshine—and tells you in her faltering tones that 'she is happy,' do you believe it ? can you give it credence, looking on the wreck of youth

and womanhood she is? Can even your weak mind satisfy itself that she is happy, hug itself complacently, deem all has been done on your part that is possible to do? Oh! no, no, no, it cannot, Arnold—you grasp your monitor by the throat and will not let it speak—you drown it in your wine—you stifle it with evil action—you will not contrast the thought you have for your wife, with the thousand thoughts in which her memory lingers not—in which all recollection of her is dead and buried!”

“What can I do?” he said in his low voice.

“Try,” replied Avice. “Try anything, do anything in which she shall be the first consideration, not yourself. Try to love Rosamond Hern as you did Rosamond Stanmore—love your baby child before he dies, for he must be taken from you, Arnold, I feel there is no hope for him!—learn to be her comforter, when that great loss occurs. I pray God it may not be too late for your repentance, or your wife’s recovery.”

Leaving him crouching before the fire, Avice went up stairs to her room to repeat her prayer that it might not be too late.

Arnold sat long before the fire and felt the sting of his humiliation; groaned under the reproof of her who had left him to his awakened conscience, felt how true it all was, and thought he would try, now,—“Poor baby—poor Rosamond!”

And he did try for a day or two, even gave up one steeple chase, his favourite amusement, to sit with his wife after Avice had returned to London. He won her smiles back, he made her look happy—then he got used to seeing her pleased, and thought she might spare him now and then; then the exhortation of his cousin grew faint and commonplace—what a queer girl she was to be sure! After that some “capital fellows” came to ask him to join them in “a trap” to the races, and he joined them. Then he lost a hundred or two on the first favourite, and came home out of temper, and bullied the servants and his father, and finally snapped up his poor Rosamond for making “a fool of herself” and crying because he had come home late and she had begun to believe something serious had happened to him.

Ah! all this is an old, old story—one effort will not make

a lasting repentance, one prayer does not change for a life time, or like charity erase from the record a multitude of sins.

Avice hardly dared to hope when she went away with Katie. She guessed at the nature of Arnold Hern too well—he was strong enough to make an effort, but not good or self-denying enough to follow it up—he could swim with the tide, but he would not breast a single wave when it was adverse to his progress. She knew that he would give up and sink!

“I hope we shall soon meet again,” said Rosamond, as she clung round Avice’s neck the morning of departure.

“I hope so.”

It was the flush of the second sunrise; and Rosamond was “happy” that day, although Avice was going home.

“You will not forget me and baby?” said Rosamond; “you will come and see us both next summer?”

“Yes, yes.”

“I shall write soon.”

“And I, dear.”

“And you *will* come for a very long stay next summer?”
Next summer!



CHAPTER VII.

THE LETTER SEALED WITH BLACK.

AFTER her return to London Avice had no small occupation for her thoughts in the care of Katie Millthorn. She found that she had not time to spare for her own long reveries, and that there was a new study for her, into which she entered with her characteristic energy and deep feeling. It was a noble study, too, that of tutoring the weak mind of this young woman, and teaching her to forget the wild passion which she had never acknowledged even to herself; framing Katie’s disposition to receive impressions which should usurp the place of her visionary love, and seeking to strengthen by her gentle rule the shallow reason of the maid. Avice did not think it a task beneath her, or an effort out of place. She sought for no reward but the con-

quest of evil, and that satisfaction in her own heart which told her she was acting for the best.

Katie's temperament was a stubborn one, and her memory tenacious. She could not forget in a moment. She dwelt upon the past, for it was a pleasing dream-like past to her, and she had been contented with it, knowing not the danger which had threatened her.

When Katie was once in London, and the excitement of her long journey had passed away; when custom had habituated her to a change of residence, to her new fellow-servants, and the friends of "dear lady Avice," she fell into a low, despondent way, from which all the efforts of her young mistress failed, for a time, to arouse her. She was affectionate in her manner towards Avice, and obeyed every little mandate with surprising alacrity. She did not know why she felt so dull. It wasn't that she missed her father much, or her mother, or her mistress. She wished that she had wings to fly back to Sanderstone for one hour—only an hour—and then come back to Miss Hern again; oh! yes, **she** would come back in one hour after she had seen them all! She wondered if anybody missed her; if Mr. Hern missed her, now, or—or—or Master Arnold? *He* used always to have a smile for her. What a handsome man he was! "But it didn't seem likely *he* should miss her, did it, lady?"

"No, it did not. She must not think of Master Arnold missing her. He had the same smiles for all," Avice thought. "Why should he miss Katie Millthorn in particular?"

"Ah! why?" said Katie, sighing.

Avice persevered in her endeavours. She related long stories in the evening to Katie, containing a plain, simple moral, which struck home, and which she, poor girl, could understand; she taught her to read better, bought her a new Bible, over which Katie cried and then clapped her hands like a child; she sat with her at times, and sought to interest her in the study of that sacred Book; she did all she could to make a woman of her, and took more care of her strange maid than many a mother would take of her daughter. It was *infra dig.* and in opposition to all rule; Miss Wrickerton and Mrs. Badge could not understand it. It was very good and kind of their Avice, but what did it

mean? Why had Avice brought almost a simpleton from Sanderstone, and constituted her her maid? Why, the girl did not appear to know anything. But then they had no doubt it was all quite proper and correct, for their Avice was far from a flighty girl in her notions, and had a capital stock of "second thoughts" always on hand.

Katie began to improve. In three weeks those smiles, the recovery of which had seemed a hopeless task, came back again; in a month or five weeks Miss Hern was everything and everybody, and she could talk of no other subject to Miss Wrickerton's servants, and won upon Miss Wrickerton herself by her recapitulation of Avice's good qualities, and even grew jealous of Mrs. Badge for calling her mistress "Avvy" like Mrs. Hern used, and before Christmas time had a bright eye and blooming cheek, and with her childish, winning ways, had become a general favourite at the house in the square.

One day—a never-forgotten day—there was a relapse. She came flying into the sitting-room with a letter in her hand, and flung herself at the feet of Avice with a wild cry.

"My good gracious! Katie," cried Mrs. Badge, "what's the matter?"

Miss Wrickerton was too astonished to say anything.

"Oh! look at the letter—the letter!" shrieked Katie. "It's news of a death. There's a black seal, and a black border so deep—so cruelly deep! Oh! for Heaven's sake, lady, tell me who is dead!"

Avice's trembling hands could scarcely break the seal; and the hastily-written letters danced so before her eyes after the note was opened that she had to pause a moment to subdue her agitation.

When she had mustered courage to look again at the letter, she glanced at the signature. It was signed Rosamond, but no line or word in that ink-stained, tear-blistered epistle was like the delicate, graceful hand-writing of the young mother.

"Katie, will you go away now, please?" said Avice. "Mrs. Hern has lost her little boy."

"That's all?" inquired Katie. "You would tell me if—any one else had died, I know."

"That's all," echoed Avice, and added in a low tone, "all

my poor sister had to live for, and to build upon, all gone now. God help her ! ”

“ It was a poor, dear baby,” said Katie, getting up from her prostrate condition. “ I’m very grieved to hear of his death, but I’m very glad to hear that it’s no worse. How fond Mistress Hern was of that little boy ! ”

Katie went out of the room, and left Avice to her sorrows.

Miss Wrickerton, after exchanging signs with Martha Badge, took that old lady’s arm, and with difficulty followed Katie’s example.

The kind-hearted schoolmistress, who had known much sorrow herself, was aware of the restraint even a best friend is to the mourner for one lost, in the first shock which the knowledge of that loss brings.

Avice’s tears were more for the mother than the baby. The first was on earth ; the last was with the angels.

The letter ran thus :

“ The Hall, December 3, 18——.

“ Dear, dear Sister,

“ My little baby has gone. God has taken him away from me. My heart is broken. He is dead.

“ Dead ! Avvy, dear Avvy, think of his being dead !—my only child, my boy. I was so proud of him !—my boy, who used to love me so, who would only smile and look at me, who was never happy but in these arms that shall press him to my breast no more—that can but stretch out yearningly to the blue Heaven where he is. Oh ! that I could be taken to him. Oh ! that I could.

“ They tell me that I must not write—must keep away from the chamber where he lies in his little coffin—that I must be calm. But I cannot be calm, or keep away ; and I *must* write to you and dear father, and tell you of my loss.

“ Do not come. I cannot bear to see a single face. You will pardon me saying this, loved sister, but if I saw you or my father I should die. I beg you not to come.

“ Arnold is very much grieved. I will write soon after—after it is all over. God bless you !

“ Ever your affectionate sister,

“ ROSAMOND.”

What could Avice Hern write in answer to this epistle ?

She knew how vain was any attempt at consolation to the bereaved mother when the wound was deep and unhealed—when even the grave had not closed over the lost one, and Time had not come with "healing wings" to the mourner. She wrote simply and unaffectedly, begging her to bear up for her husband and father's sake, to have trust in the All Wise who had thought fit that the little one should be gathered to his rest.

She could say no more than that—she left it for time to work a change, and to soften the knowledge of her irreparable loss. She left it for time—but time is slow to bring balm to the grief of a life, though a life burdened with sorrow glideth quick to eternity.



CHAPTER VIII.

"HAPPY."

CHRISTMAS EVE! A cold, iron-hearted Christmas for the poor, a bitter, frosty season which had nipped at the core of many a home and withered it. Night and day, no matter, still it froze, still the wind with icy fangs blew on and on in one direction; still the arrows on the housetops pointed to the north, and were immovable as Fate.

Men, women, and children stole shivering along the streets; beggars huddled together under gateways, and wanderers of the night were found frozen dead on the doorsteps, in dark recesses of the bridges, or under heaps of baskets in the public markets. The Thames was a rugged mass of ice which heaved with every ebb and flow, and ground against the sides of barges and round the rough stone arches, threatening annihilation to all obstacle. People talked of a few more days' such frost and then of the old fair times upon the river, and bullocks roasted whole. Men whose trade was out of doors, watermen, gardeners, bricklayers, porters at wharves and docks, assembled in the streets, and bore aloft their flaming placards, demanding help and food and warmth, or woe must come of it to richer men than they. Starvation crept into honest homes, put out the fire, took its place upon the

hearth-stone, and laid its wasted hands on honest heads. London was the city of the poor that year, and all the gifts which flowed unsparingly from those who had it in their power to bestow seemed to have availed nothing in the balance against penury.

It was Christmas Eve, and the spirit of that holy season was not lacking, for even Famine with its blue lips muttered its merry Christmas midst the crowd.

A tall man, whose figure was draped by a heavy cloak, stood knocking at the door of the house in the square, knocking so loudly and repeatedly in his vehemence that the doors of other houses opened, and servants' faces with astonished looks upon them peered forth to see if fire or murder was the origin of tumult.

The porter, pale with fright, answered the startling summons, and the stranger strode in, and without any regard to ceremonious deportment crossed the hall, turned the handle of the nearest room door and startled three ladies by his precipitate appearance.

"I beg pardon," said he huskily; "excuse my abruptness, Miss Wrickerton, but I am in haste. Miss Hern, you must come with me."

"Oh! Mr. Stanmore—dear Sir, what has happened?" cried Avice, tremblingly rising from her chair. Oh! do not say there is any more bad news—that—that Rosamond—"

"She is very ill—she is past hope," he answered in a deep agitated voice; "she wishes to see you and me directly; the message has been sent by telegraph. Will you get on your bonnet and shawl if you please, Avice? there is a night train to Branscombe, it goes in half-an-hour."

He sank into a vacant chair, and sat hat in hand staring at the carpet.

Miss Wrickerton ventured to address a few words to him as Avice hurriedly retired.

"I hope nothing serious is anticipated, Mr. Stanmore."

"Everything, Madam," he answered, without raising his head. The message said 'past hope.'

"God bless the poor young lady!" said Martha Badge. "So young, and to have suffered so much."

"Is Avice ready?" he asked impatiently. "She is long in changing her dress."

"She has but just left the room, my dear Sir," said Miss Wrickerton gently.

"Ah! pardon me," he said. "I did not think."

He was silent for a minute, then he looked up suddenly and said again:

"Is Avice ready? What detains her now?"

Each instant Mr. Stanmore gave some such sign of eager impatience to be on his journey, until Avice reappeared equipped for travelling. She came in very white, and after regarding her anxiously a moment he said:

"I have hurried you too much; the shock has been too sudden for you. Take some wine, Avice, or sit and rest a moment."

"No, no," she answered, "let us go. Good-bye, Miss Wrickerton, good-bye, Martha," embracing them both. "Take care of Katie; give her good-bye from me. Now, Mr. Stanmore, I am ready."

Stanmore made some hasty adieux and followed Avice to the hall door.

"My carriage has come, I hope," said he. "I told the coachman to follow me. I could not wait for it. I ran hither."

The carriage was outside and Avice and Mr. Stanmore hastily entered it.

"To the railway station—quick!"

Stanmore wrapped himself in his cloak and leaned back with a groan.

"It may have been an exaggerated message," suggested Avice, "my uncle and his son are both impetuous and hasty."

He shook his head.

"I have expected it," he murmured; "what else was there to expect after her child's death? What was there then to live for? Such a life as hers was not worth struggling to retain. Murdered, murdered!"

"Dear guardian!"

"Murdered by slow degrees I verily believe," he said, "shut out from sympathy and husband's love, and murdered that way. There is no law for men who break fond women's hearts; such wretches always thrive."

He spoke no more during their rapid progress toward the railway station, and Avice was left to her own terrified

whirl of thoughts. Everything seemed to be in confusion, she could not settle to the one horror before her—she could scarcely comprehend or believe, that she was going to Sanderstone—that Rosamond was dying ; she could not cry for the sense of fear which was upon her, and which numbed her with its heavy weight.

They were at the station, and Mr. Stanmore was pushing a way through the crowd for himself and Avice. Presently, they were in the railway carriage, with a very old gentleman, and two young ones for companions.

“Cold weather, Sir,” said the old gentleman, to Mr. Stanmore, “a most severe winter, is it not ?”

“Yes,” answered Stanmore, laconically.

“Too cold for travelling,” said one of the young men joining in, “and a leetle too seasonable, eh ?”

This observation requiring no comment, everybody was silent. Mr. Stanmore lay back, feigning a profound sleep in order to preclude any further topic of discourse from being thrust upon him ; the old gentleman, after blinking for some time at the lamp in the roof, went off in earnest, the two young men curled themselves in their railway rugs, and began a desultory conversation concerning their skating accomplishments, and the merits of the family they were journeying to, and with whom they intended to spend their merry Christmas.

The screaming whistle gave its summons to the night—the lights of the station, the guards, the friends upon the platform glided from the sight ; and they were rattling away.

The murky London streets below, dotted by specks of fire, were soon left behind and they were driving through the darkness, and hurrying to Rosamond.

What a long journey it was that Christmas Eve, although they stopped at nothing, but went whirling on and screaming by lighted station after station, and darting swiftly into the dark night again.

The two young men fell asleep, after half-an-hour’s talk, and began a vigorous snoring match against the old gentleman in the corner, which rendered the first class compartment resonant with noise.

Avice was still in great confusion of idea, and struggling through chaos with voices crying “Rosamond” and “past

hope" in her ears. It must be all a dream, and she should soon wake up and hear Katie tapping outside her bed-room door.

She heard another voice at her side, which startled her.

"Take this, you are cold."

Mr. Stanmore had disengaged his cloak from his shoulders, and was holding it towards her.

"No, no thank you—I am not cold."

"You are shivering—take it," said he, "I should have been more considerate, Avice."

"But you?"

"I shall not miss it," said he, placing it lightly round her form, "there, now try and go to sleep."

"That is not likely."

"Try."

He folded his arms across his chest, and closed his eyes again.

The train rattled on another hour, and then stopped at a large station.

"What's the matter?" cried the old gentleman, waking up in affright, and lowering the window to peer out.

"Stow that, Sir!" cried one of the young men, jumping in his seat indignantly, "stow that, Sir! too cold, by Jove, for that fun."

The old gentleman drew up the window, and with a grunt, rolled himself into his original posture. The engine had received a fresh supply of water, those passengers who had ventured from their carriages came running out of the refreshment rooms to their old places, the bell rang—the engine yelled out its warning note, and then went panting on once more—the station lights, the faces of the guards, the platform heaped with hampers, boxes, Christmas presents, all faded to the dark country landscape, through which the train cuts its headlong way.

At Branscombe. Lights again, and a crowd of travellers issuing from the carriages, and another crowd of friends, waiting with outstretched hands to give them welcome and a merry Christmas.

A merry Christmas! how like mockery it sounded to two travellers threading their way to the doors which led to the

High Street of the town—would there ever be a merry Christmas again to either guardian or ward?

"Is that you both? yes, come on."

Walter Hern muffled to the chin, stood at the great door opening on the street.

"How is she, Hern?" asked Stanmore.

"Don't ask, man," he answered. "I wish to God I could say better!"

"Is she worse?" cried Avice.

"She can be no worse," said Hern; "there's but a few more hours for her. It's very awful, Stanmore."

"What is it?"

"Death."

"Awful!" replied Stanmore, "you mistake—it is a release. What woman or man who has tasted the bitterness of life as Rosamond has, would care for anything but death?"

"Here's the carriage," said Hern, after a wondering stare at Stanmore, "I've four horses to it, so we shall not be long getting to Sanderstone."

"This way, Avice."

They entered the carriage, and were soon tearing along the frost bound road, which rang like iron beneath the clattering horses' heels.

"Arnold's almost mad," said Hern, after a long silence.

"Well he may be," was Stanmore's reply.

"Poor fellow!" added the father, "it's precious hard to lose a wife so young."

"To some."

"Surely there is hope, however slight, Mr. Hern?" asked Avice eagerly, "the doctors have not given her up entirely?"

"I'm afraid they have," said Hern in reply; "you see she took on so about the boy, that she was forced after the funeral to keep her bed. She would not let us write to you—she begged and prayed the doctors not to let us write, and unnecessarily alarm you, and they told us that your coming would be fatal to her in her present state of mind, and so we didn't write. But this afternoon she broke down altogether, and I telegraphed to you at her own wish."

"She knows the worst—or best?" inquired Stanmore.

"Yes."

"How long shall we be getting to the Hall?"

"Not very long."

"Then don't speak again," said Stanmore harshly, "leave me to my own thoughts—I cannot bear your voice intruding on them. You will excuse me, Hern," added he, less abruptly, "I am not myself to-night."

"All right, Stanmore," replied Hern, "you feel it like Arnold—there's no doubt."

"*He* feel!" cried Stanmore.

"He's mad, I tell you," said Hern; "there's no doing anything with him. He's raving mad about his wife."

"He will get over it in a week," muttered Stanmore, turning away his head, and half burying it in the cushioned side of the carriage.

There were no more words spoken during the journey; and when the four horses drew up steaming and panting before the Hall, and the three occupants of the carriage passed into the house, still not a syllable was exchanged between them.

One or two servants stood like statues in the passages, and looked askance at the new comers. There was an unnatural stillness reigning throughout the place, as if the shadow of death had already fallen on it.

"This room, Stanmore," said Hern; "we'd better wait here. John," to a footman who had followed them, "tell them they've come."

"Yes, Sir."

"This isn't much like Christmas," said Walter with a grim half-smile; "we never expected this, you or I, Stanmore."

"No," was the laconic answer.

The door opened, and Arnold in his deep mourning came into the room. The mourning of a father for a child!

He turned a haggard face towards them as he advanced.

"She has been asking for you again," he said to Avice, pressing her hand. "I am glad you have come."

He held out his hand to Stanmore.

"No, Sir!" cried Stanmore, recoiling. "This is not a time for courtesy to me. I cannot touch your hand—you that have brought her to her early grave. It is a hollow

sign of friendship at the best. Keep back ! I would rather have your curse ! ”

“ I bring a curse to every one whose path I cross,” replied Arnold, with a wild gleam in his eyes. “ I have not spared one friend. I am foredoomed to bring a sorrow or an injury to all with whom I come in contact, I am a villain—a damned villain ! ”

He clenched his disregarded hand, and struck it with violence upon the table ; then, after glaring at each of the faces before him, he sank into a chair, and rested his head upon his arms.

An elderly gentleman opened the door, and came into the room.

“ The head physcian,” muttered Walter Hern, by way of introduction. “ He came from London yesterday.”

“ Mr. Stanmore, the father of my poor patient ? ” asked he, in a low voice.

“ The same, Sir.”

“ And her sister ? ”

There was no need for any explanation ; so Avice inclined her head, and kept her inquiring eyes bent on him.

“ Mrs. Hern is asleep,” said he ; “ I do not think it would be judicious to wake her just this moment.”

It was all reality now to Avice ; it was no dream—it was too true ! She felt the agony of her position growing more unendurable each instant. Springing to the physician’s side, and laying her hands upon his arm, she cried beseechingly, “ You will tell us that there is one faint spark of hope for her—that she is young and may yet battle against the disease. Oh ! do say that, Sir ! She is so very young ! ”

“ I dare do nothing but prepare you for your sister’s loss, my dear young lady,” said he, tenderly, “ to bid you try to bear the knowledge of our common end with fortitude, and trust in God.”

“ How long may this sleep last ? ” asked Stanmore.

“ An hour, perhaps less.”

“ And then ? ”

The physician read his glance aright, and answered :

“ It is uncertain ; she is very weak—another hour or two—no more, I think.”

Stanmore asked no further questions ; and the physician left the room and went up stairs again.

Avice sat shuddering in the chair by the fire. Walter Hern leant against the mantelpiece, and stolidly regarded the desponding figure of his son ; and Mr. Stanmore paced up and down the room in silence. Avice felt her uncle's hand touch her shoulder. She looked up.

"He's been like that two days," indicating Arnold with a nod of the head. "You wouldn't have me believe now he wasn't—*isn't* fond of her?"

"Wild in his grief as he was wild and unheeding when there was nothing to grieve for," murmured Avice. "It is not true sorrow that."

"What is it?"

"Extravagance."

"Hum!"

"He feels it now—he would not be a man if he did not. But," with a quivering lip, "he will soon forget her. It is not in his nature to remember."

They relapsed into another long silence, which was eventually broken by the servant opening the door.

"Will Miss Hern please to walk up?"

"Is she awake?"

"Yes, Miss."

Avice rose and walked slowly out of the room, evading the long, mournful glance which Stanmore bestowed upon her as she passed him.

Up the carpeted stairs, dragging her faltering feet towards her "sister's" sick room ; pausing on the broad landing-place before the door with her hand upon her heart—into Rosamond's sick chamber and separating the curtains of the bed on which the old friend lay panting out her life.

"Ah ! Avvy dear, you have come !"

"Ah ! Rosamond," was the answer, "why did you let me stay away so long?"

Avice stooped over the bed and kissed the burning lips ; whilst her "sister's" arms stole round her neck, and kept her by her side.

"You don't mind staying by me, dearest?"

"No, no—mind!"

"Because I wish to tell you something, and my voice is

getting feeble," said Rosamond, tightening her clasp, "because you and I have to say 'good-bye' to-night, dear—a long good-bye!"

Avice half sat, half lay by her side, and Rosamond, with an effort which she would not allow Avice to resist, rose slightly in the bed, and laid her head upon the "sister's" breast. How often she had done it in her childhood! how often in the strength and beauty of her womanhood, even in the consciousness of her own need of support and comfort from that more firmly moulded mind! Avice had never dreamed that she would lay her head upon her breast in her dying hour, or that that dying hour would come so suddenly and soon.

"Avvy, you are crying."

Avice, with averted head, made no reply.

"I hope you will not cry," said Rosamond. "I hope you will not shed any tears for me. I shall go away in peace. I shall be happy with my baby."

"You do not fear?" asked Avice, mastering her emotion by an effort.

"Oh, no!" answered Rosamond, brushing with one hand some golden locks of hair from her marble forehead. "I shall be glad to leave the world—it is so strange a world to me! I do not seem to form a part of it."

"Thank God that you are reconciled to leaving it!"

"To leaving you and father, and Arnold, yes. Ah! Arnold, where is he now, poor husband?"

"He is down stairs with your father."

"I wish that he could be reconciled to parting with me," said Rosamond. "I hope, Avvy, that you will talk to him after I have left him. Tell him there is nothing to forgive from me—he thinks there is, dear. Tell him that he has ever been a good husband to me, and made me a happy wife! Never let him think that he neglected me, or broke my heart—he did not, Avvy—he did not indeed! I could not live without my baby, that was all!"

After a long and painful breathing, Rosamond went on again.

"Sister, you are crying still," said she, gently withdrawing Avice's hand from before her agitated face. "There, dry your tears, and listen to me ere I get too weak. My dear, dear father—you must let him know," looking into Avice's

face with her full gleaming blue eyes, "that Arnold has been good, and kind, and considerate to me, and that I have been very, very *happy* as his wife. It will break *his* heart too, if he think otherwise, and he will think falsely if you cannot urge upon him how—happy I have ever been! Oh! Avvy, Avvy, for God's sake remember this! It is for my Arnold's sake I beg of you. He must not throw Arnold off, because I am lying in my grave—he, Arnold, my first love, the father of my little boy who is waiting for his mother! Tell him I was happy; for I was, Avice—I—I really—really was!"

"Hush! hush!" cried Avice, straining the frail form to hers; "I will say all this, Rosamond—I will not forget a syllable; but you must not excite yourself thus, you must not say another word—there, lie back upon these pillows."

"Avice, Avice," she murmured, as Avice disengaged herself from her embrace, and laid her back upon the bed. "don't go—where are you?"

She stretched her hand towards her, groping as in the darkness.

"I have not gone," said Avice, placing her hand in Rosamond's.

"That is right, dearest—you will promise not to leave me?"

"I will not leave you, if you will be still."

"The doctor said I might speak—he sought to place no restraint upon me, and I have more to say, dear."

"Not now—not now."

"Avice, you shall hear this. I should not die happy if you turned a deaf ear to my next words."

"You will promise to be calm, dear Rosamond?"

"Yes."

"I am listening then."

"You love Clifton, now?"

"Don't talk of him, dear Rosamond—what has he to do with this sad night?" said Avice. "I do not love him, but let us say no more about him, sister. Shall I call your father—you would like to see him?"

"Presently," said Rosamond, "but let me say a little more—though not of Edward Clifton. My father's life is very lonely, very desolate—each year brings a bitter aggra-

vation of his misery—would you go back to be his house-keeper, to cheer his life again? I have been lying here the last two days, and thinking if you would but take pity on his loneliness—you he used to love so!”

“How can I promise this?”

“I don’t say now—I don’t say for years and years—but one day when he is getting old—when he is more bowed down with care, and suffers more from thought of me or you, or—others—when people cannot say a word of slander, but admire you for your love to him—when he is old and grey-headed—will you go then?”

“Yes.”

“Again; will you go when he is sick or ill, and rescue him from the horror of strange unsympathising faces round him—will you tend him as you would tend a father or a husband? This is a harder promise, but you will not deny it me—it is the last I ask, dear Avvy?”

“I promise, and—”

“Why do you pause?”

“One moment.”

Avice went on in a low voice.

“If to tell you the secret of my life will make you happy, Rosamond,” murmured Avice, “it is soon told, and you will forgive me keeping it so long—it was at his desire. One day your father offered me his hand—offered to make me his dear wife. I thought of Clifton then, or of our disparity of age—not of heart, for his was green and young—and told him that it could never be. We parted and I have but seen him thrice since that day. But I have thought of him so much, have seen the contrast that he is to younger men, have learned to value the nobleness and goodness of his nature—to value it at its just worth, with all my heart and love. You must not tell him this, Rosy; he may have long since subdued all his old passion for me; but—but if ever he should give sign to me, or seek me out again, I, I will say ‘take my hand and my whole heart if they be worth the claiming; the heart was yours when the lip first gave denial.’ I did not think so at the time, but I know now that it was, dear sister.”

“God bless you, Avvy,” said Rosamond, pressing the hands still retained within her own, “I shall die with-

out one regret, now—he will claim you, I feel assured he will. They may come now, I am getting—very weak ! ”

Avice gently touched a bell rope at the side, and in a minute they were all there ; father, husband, Hern, and Avice, with the physician and the doctor in the background.

Arnold flung himself at her bed-side and cried out :

“ Oh curse me, Rosamond—oh ! curse me with your dying breath, and bid God’s lightning blast me kneeling here ! I have robbed you of your young life ; I have sacrificed you to my selfishness ; I have done all but love and honour as I promised on our wedding day. Oh ! curse me ere you die ! ”

She laid her hand upon his head and murmured :

“ Bless you, Arnold ! I can say but that. Why there is nothing even to forgive. Father, you will not think anything of this ! I pray you will not for my sake, it is but his wildness ! He made me very happy, Avice will tell you that he did ; we never quarrelled in our lives : he made me happy, father, dear father—you will not forget that he made me happy—he—my Arnold ? ”

“ No, no. Oh ! God, no ! ”

Stanmore leaned over her and kissed her long and passionately, whilst Arnold’s convulsive sobs shook the bed on which she lay.

“ Are you there, Avice darling ? ”

“ Yes, Rosamond, here.”

“ Kiss me once more and say good-bye—not for ever, it will not be for ever, Avvy ! Good-bye, dear father, your best days of life are yet to come, even upon earth. Good-bye, my Arnold, think of me sometimes, I know you will ; your little wife, dear husband ! Good-bye, Mr. Hern, you have been kind to me, too, I thank you—thank you.”

She heaved a sigh and slowly closed her eyes.

“ Is she dead ? ” whispered Hern, wiping two strange drops from his rough cheeks.

“ Hush ! ” cried Stanmore, “ she is speaking.”

“ Is this Christmas morning ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ It is a fair day to die ; the holiest of days on which

He came to die for all of us. Remember that—remember ! ”

She went on in a low whisper with her thin white hand still resting on the head of Arnold.

“ Good-bye, again. Good-bye, all of you. There is baby,” her face lighting up an instant, and then shadowing over quickly, “ my dear baby ; oh ! now I am so HAPPY ! ”

END OF THE EIGHTH BOOK.

B O O K I X .

“ Like the golden sun
Dispels the sullen shades with her sweet influence,
And cheers the melancholy house of care.”

ROWE’S “ JANE SHORE.”

Act II, Scene I.

CHAPTER I.

"THE HALL" COMES TO THE HAMMER.

AVICE HERN is home again at the house in the square. Time, the hoary robber, has stolen another march since Rosamond Hern bade adieu to time for ever. Two months have passed and the winter is hastening away. Avice has subsided into her old quiet life—a life of deeper sorrow, but a life of false content beneath which is a restlessness of mind and heart for which there is no alleviation. She has heard nothing from the Hall, every one there appears to have resumed his past habits, to have adopted those pursuits which were abandoned for a few weeks preceding and following the death of her dear "sister," and to have forgotten Avice Hern.

Mr. Stanmore she has seen but once, and that for a few hasty minutes, since they came home together in their mourning from the Hall, but he has promised Avice to do all in his power for Arnold, and Avice has kept her word with Rosamond in taking up his cause. Can she ever keep those other promises when by his reserve he waives her to a distance? "When he grows old—when scandal cannot say a word against them both?" But would he be glad even then to welcome back the little Wildflower? "If he were ill?" She prays that time may never come. And is he not fast forgetting her already?

"If ever he should seek her out again or give sign of his old passion!" She promised that herself! but it will never come to pass; she feels that passion is for ever dead, by the icy chill at her heart when her truant thoughts stray back to him. A man of his strong mind has long since crushed out the strange romance of his mature years—it was a fancy—a caprice such as men have at times; and he has now abandoned it; it has been lost in his intense application to the business of the crown; what is there to love in her, or what in her remembrance to keep love alive and battling against hope? Avice also draws a picture at which she

tries to smile sometimes ; she pictures their living on, and on, with love divided, and thoughts separate and distinct ; both getting old and silver-haired, and wearing spectacles, and meeting occasionally (of course in her picture he has declined the prim maid of forty years or so for housekeeper), and laughing at that bygone romantic age wherein he actually—*actually* !—proposed to her. And she will be such a queer little fright at forty, too—so methodical, so unlikely ever to have been loved, quite ugly in fact ! She is sure she shall be an extremely ugly old woman, she is so very plain for a young one. And then, continues Avice in her picture book, one day when they are both very, very old, when he is seventy and she fifty, and they can talk nonsense with impunity, she will tell him, laughing all the while in one of those horribly shrill trebles peculiar to extremely ugly old women, how sorry she was that, once upon a time she did not accept that offer made on the dull Sunday evening at Sanderstone, that he took her too much by surprise and did not give her time to dwell upon the matter, or to analyse her feelings, and that if he had only been kind enough to ask again, and have taken pity on her, and not have put too much confidence in a young lady's "No." Then she will pause and give her risible faculties full play again ; and there will be many a merry jest that evening between them, and there will be no harm in it, for they will be so old !

Heigho ! "Laughing and merry jests !" It is hard to think of laughing and jesting yet awhile, with a loss so recent, and the dark cloud hanging over everything..

Clifton is still rising in the world ; Avice sees his name chronicled at all the fashionable reunions. No lion greater than he has yet bounded with a roar from the brushwood, and taken the literati by storm.

Clifton, it has been already said, is a lucky man ; for one who bounds, there are ten thousand to crawl on over the long space of years, ere they feel those wings to their backs which shall flutter them upwards.

Avice and Clifton do not meet. He calls not at Miss Wrickerton's residence any more ; he has had quite enough of Miss Hern, a young woman he thinks of not so refined a taste as might have been expected, a very strange young woman indeed ! Avice does not know if Mrs. Clifton be in

London or not; it is certain the mother calls not on her. The Clifton circle is distinct from Avice Hern's; let it be so, she is neither pained nor grieved.

Farewell, duchess! Farewell, Edward Clifton! would we could have made thee more the hero of our story book.

Visitors come from Sanderstone to see Avice at last. A father and son of the name of Hern.

Miss Wrickerton and Mrs. Badge are out, and they are ushered into the room wherein Avice is sitting alone. Avice looks from one to the other, and is struck at the great change on the faces of both—she would hardly have known them in the street.

Walter Hern is not like the same man; he has given way still more in the back and shuffles along with the aid of a stick, and appears very weak and ill. Arnold's face is pale and careworn, and bears evidence of the one sorrow yet. Walter Hern is leaning heavily on his arm, as they both slowly advance in their black garments towards our heroine.

"We've come—we've not forgotten you, girl!" says Hern in a mumbling sleepy tone, quite distinct from his old gruff voice, "you're about the last of our friends, they've all dropped away. I'm done for—Arnold's done for—and the Hall—that's where I feel it—is done for like the rest of us! It's breaking of my heart."

He slips from his son's arm into a chair, begins shaking his head at the carpet and seems half inclined to sob.

Avice looks at Arnold, who, rightly interpreting her glance, answers:

"He has been very ill, an attack of palsy following his excitement about the Hall has made great inroads on his health, Avice. I fear that he will never be very strong again."

"I'm sure I shan't," breaks in Walter. "I'm a helpless, broken-down fellow. I'm going to the dogs, and the Hall's going to the dogs, and Arnold's going the Lord knows where!"

"Ay, Avice, he's right," says Arnold.

"I do not understand."

"It is a story told in a few words, cousin," says Arnold, taking a seat near Avice, "the Hall is to be sold by auction

at Garraway's, on Friday week next. We cannot pay the mortgage money, and so the property must. Out of the wreck, there will be left enough to keep my father either in apartments, or at a little house in the suburbs."

"To keep us both," interrupts Walter, "upon my soul, Arnold, there will be enough to keep us both, if you will only stop."

"The sooner I am free from London, the better, father," answers Arnold. "I could not live such a life. I could not drag my soul out in that new fashion—I should go mad in half-a-dozen days."

Selfish even in his sorrow, the old failing still predominant—the grand study ever—Arnold Hern!

"Well, you know best, Arnold," says Walter Hern, "but it's hard to live alone again—to turn into some hole of a place, and die like a dog—I shall never live to see you come back, Arnold boy."

"I hope you will."

"No, no—not I."

"There's no rousing him, Avice," says Arnold, turning to her, "he's very low-spirited—I try my best to cheer him—I —"

"Are you going to leave England?" asks Avice.

"Yes—Mr. Stanmore has been good enough to procure me a clerkship in an East-Indian establishment," answers Arnold, "it is a change of life that will suit me—it is a change that may wean me from the horrid thoughts of what a villain I have been. Oh! Avice, you will hardly believe that I am trying at the eleventh hour to become a better man."

Avice sighs.

"If I could curb my passion more," continues Arnold, "I am trying all I can do to keep it down; it is a giant's task, but I have a talisman which aids me."

"And that is?"

"One word—'Rosamond,'" he replies.

"Ah! Arnold, Arnold—how long will that name check you in a headstrong career—how many weeks before it dies away?"

"Oh! trust me, trust me," he says, in a confident tone; "ask father how less passionate I have become!"

"Only one break out since his wife died," answers Walter

Hern, "and then he nearly killed a bailiff; it served him right though—that it did."

Arnold colours.

"But it was quite excusable," Hern adds, "and Arnold was much put out. Poor fellow! it happened all for the best; for it was the first thing that roused him, he couldn't bear to see the man poking about Rosamond's room, and so he pitched him out of window."

After a chuckle of considerable length at this reminiscence, Walter Hern subsides into the low-spirited, broken-down old man again.

"When do you leave for India?" inquires Avice.

"In a week."

"So soon!"

"The sooner I am gone the better, Avice. I hope to retrieve my name out there, or to die before I have the chance! God knows! I care little for the years before me, or how short they are."

"That's how he goes on," moans Hern, "and makes me miserable."

"Avice," says Arnold, "I have come to ask you a favour, as well as bid you good-bye."

"If it be in my power to grant it, you need not hesitate," replies Avice.

"Excuse me, father," says Arnold, drawing Avice to the further end of the room.

Walter Hern is too deep in reverie to pay much attention to the secret conference between his son and Avice; he sits gravely shaking his head, and silently reproaching the pattern of the carpet.

"You see how changed he is?"

"Yes," answers Avice.

"Would you mind—not for his sake or mine, for we don't deserve it, but in the natural goodness of your heart—paying him a visit once a month or so, just to see that he is not worried by harpies, or robbed by the servant who may be with him—just to see if he be well enough to take care of himself?" says Arnold. "It is a strange favour to ask of you, cousin, but—I have only you to ask."

"Mr. Hern intends to reside in London?"

"Yes."

"It is a slight request, and I make the promise

willingly," says Avice, adding, "Mr. Hern appears very weak."

"He's almost childish," replies Arnold. "I feel that I am a wretch to leave him—but I cannot stop here, Avice. I must be in action, and have something to distract me. And you—how shall I thank you for your kindness, cousin?"

"Do not thank me at all," answers Avice; "he is my father's brother, Arnold."

But Arnold continues expressing his grateful thanks, and is evidently much relieved at having found some one to take an interest in his father.

It is the old failing—the shifting his own responsibility to another's shoulders—the thinking how much better he could now proceed upon his journey, but it is a selfishness less apparent and more subdued, and Rome was not built in a day!

There is certainly an improvement in Arnold Hern; there was a time when he would have followed his own pursuits, without so much as a thought for his father, or a care how that father was attended to after he had once entered upon his own career—but will the improvement last?

Avice fears to answer the question—she does not believe that it will endure; she has seen a great deal of Arnold Hern in her time, and of the result of all his good resolutions, and he is going into the world again!

Avice feels more pity for him and his father than she has ever done in her life—feels that there is a tie between them and her, and that were they to see more of each other, now the son is subdued, and the father in affliction—that tie might draw her closer to them, and she might in her way work some good to both.

As Arnold and Avice return to their seats, the latter is struck with the resemblance Walter Hern bears to his father the poor office-keeper, as he sits there helplessly in his chair. She has never observed the likeness before—there has been too striking a contrast between her weak old grandfather, and the burly, strong-limbed fellow whom she first saw in the winter's night at Whitehall—but now there is a great change in Walter Hern, he stoops considerably—his form has wasted away to half its size, and the family look of the Herns has become singularly apparent.

As she is regarding Walter Hern, Martha Badge suddenly

enters, gives a short jump, and then stands staring at the figure of the worn-out ruffian.

Hern looks up.

"Ah! Mrs. Badge," says he, in a shaking voice, "not quite so strong as I used to be, you see. We're fairer matched, old lady, fairer matched, mind you."

"Oh! dear, who'd have thought of you being here?" gasps Mrs. Badge.

"Don't let's have any more rows," says Walter with an almost imploring look from his bloodshot eyes. "I'm not inclined for it, no, no, not half the pluck I used to have. I'm a ruined man—it's all up with me, Mrs. Badge!"

"I see you're altered," replies Mrs. Badge, "I hope it's not too late for you to make amends, Walter Hern—it's time you did."

"Right, old woman, right," mutters Hern, "it's time I did. The Hall's to be sold on Friday week next at Garraway's, and Arnold's going to India."

"Is he?" remarks Mrs. Badge with a half frightened glance at him.

"We've been enemies a long, long while, Mrs. Badge," says Hern. "I shouldn't mind being friends and shaking hands and forgetting bygones."

"They ain't to be forgot," replies the strong-minded Martha.

"Right again!" says Walter. "I don't think they are. Well, please to go away, then—I can't bear to see you, Mother Badge, upon my soul, you make me almost nervous."

Mrs. Badge retires at his request, and Arnold and his father rise to take their leave.

"Will you not stay and see Miss Wrickerton?"

"No, thank'ee," replies Walter Hern, "I'd rather go now—I'll come another time, after Friday week next—good-bye niece, for the present. Now Arnold, as soon as you can."

"Good-bye, Avice," says Arnold, offering both his hands, "let me thank you once in my life—thank you for all past kindness to me and poor Rosamond. I'm going to amend—I really am, cousin."

"I hope you are."

"If I had but amended sooner, Avice," he exclaims.

"Ah, Rosamond was not fit for me after all, was she?"

"No."

"If I could—but enough of ifs; good-bye."

He relinquishes her hands and turns towards his father, and offers him his arm to lean upon.

The ill-assorted couple slowly leave the room, and Katie comes stealing in a few minutes afterwards, to make inquiry concerning Arnold Hern, and to lament over the changed looks of her young master.

Walter Hern and his son go home to their rooms at an hotel in the Strand, and Arnold spends the rest of the day in writing to tailors and the East Indian Company and to those who have (as he sees by *Times'* advertisements) small houses to let in London or suburban districts.

He finds a house at last in Hampstead Road, and the next day or two is spent in taking possession and in furnishing it. It is a series of terrible bores to Arnold, and puts him out of temper more than once or twice, but he solaces himself with the filial affection of the thing, and the desire to see his father settled, and the knowledge that it cannot last much longer, and he shall soon be quit of the muddle!

A servant is procured to wait upon Walter Hern, and Millthorn, who has come to London for a day or two, to see after a little shop suitable for himself and "Bess," has promised to keep an eye on the old gentleman, and "cheer him up a bit."

When Arnold is ready to proceed upon his journey, Walter Hern parts with his boy! Walter Hern would have felt that parting in the days of his prosperity, in the full strength of his mind and body, and he gives way now so much, and cries and sobs so violently, that Arnold goes away with an inward foreboding of never seeing him again.

Millthorn, who chances to be with Walter Hern, does his best to arouse his old master from depression, and sits with him all that day, listening to his muttered griefs.

"I took him from the gipsies—he don't care for me a bit; he's left me all alone, his poor old father!"

In the sudden dotage to which he has fallen—in the sense

of loneliness that has come over him—in the knowledge of his son leaving him to the wreck of his home and his strength, is there not retribution ?

Every day Hern becomes more of the old man, and looks more like the father who kept the office near Whitehall. He wanders about the streets alone, and takes omnibuses to the City, and is set down near Garraway's ; the direction to which he regularly inquires. Then he hangs about the narrow turnings which lead to the auction mart, prowls about the door of the place itself, reads, with tears in his eyes, the bills of his own estate, and watches from across the way those who are attracted by the same, and surprises not a few as they come out of the office with bills of sale in their hands, by touching them on the shoulder and saying, " A fine estate, Sir—one of the largest in the kingdom."

The sale comes on, and Mr. Stanmore sacrifices a day, and accompanies Walter Hern. The room is crowded: men stand on tiptoe in the passages, and shout their bids in at the door ; Stanmore and Hern sit at one of the tables, lost in the mass of people, and Hern jumps to his feet at every offer, and tries to catch a glimpse of the capitalist amongst the crowd. When the bidding flags, and the auctioneer begins to expatiate in florid language on the extent of the estate, the improvements that have been made by its late proprietors, &c., Hern sinks into his seat and plays idly with the pens in the inkstand, turns the pounce boxes upside down, and scatters the dust over himself and Mr. Stanmore, and repeats slowly and inwardly the encomiums of the auctioneer.

When there is a very long pause, Hern looks wistfully at Mr. Stanmore, and says :

" Won't you risk a bid, Sir?—you'll never let the property go for a song like that ?"

Stanmore can give but a shake of the head for a reply.

Another offer, and Hern jumps once more to his feet. It is the real baronet—the lord and husband of the *ci-devant* Miss Mistleford (he has come from Branscome to make his own bids for the estate)—who screams it out from the passage. The last bidder adds another fifty pounds, a third breaks in, the sale goes on with renewed briskness, and Hern and the auctioneer rub their hands and brighten up.

The hammer falls at last. The Hall has passed to strangers' keeping, and Walter Hern, as he wipes his eyes, whispers to Stanmore to stay a minute or two—he should so like to see the man that has become the purchaser! Hern takes an absorbing interest in the new proprietor, when an assistant condescends to point him out, looks at him eagerly as he stands and talks to the auctioneer, and cannot be led away from the rooms till the new owner of the Hall, having settled the preliminary business and left his deposit in good faith, beats a brisk retreat.

"They didn't know me; even the auctioneer hardly knew it was my place," says Hern, as they entered the narrow street; "it's all in the hands of my creditors, and I've nothing to do with it. Ah! Mr. Stanmore, I ought not to have got rid of Dick's money in my time—and have come to the dogs in this fashion. It's cursed hard that an honest, upright man should be driven almost to want in his old age!"

CHAPTER II.

DOTAGE.

AVICE kept her promise to Arnold Hern—she had become a young woman of many promises—and did not forget to call occasionally at a little house in Hampstead Road, and cheer by her presence the deserted home of Walter Hern.

After the sale of the Hall, Walter Hern's spirits fell another degree or two, and he doubled himself in his chair and took to sadly reproaching the carpet with increased intensity. He began to look out anxiously for Avice's visits, and all the day she was expected, he harassed the old woman who attended on him, by repeated directions to prepare for her, and make everything straight, and hunt up some fruit, and wine, and biscuits—"she was his own niece and the only one who had not forgotten him now he had dropped dead as a stone from his high estate!"

When Avice had arrived, he would struggle out of his fits of despondency, and enter into rambling discourse about

Sanderstone, and the hunts he had had, and the best of company that had hailed him "good fellow," night after night at the Hall. He would talk of Arnold—the boy who had deserted him—of Rosamond and his grandchild in a breath, confound one with another, cry over them all, and recover breath to say how good it was of Avice not to forget the old dog who had been worried to death, and who couldn't live much longer, he was so precious miserable.

Avice remarked that he never talked of his father; of the days at Whitehall; of his own career before he went to Sanderstone; he dated every epoch from his country life, and the time when he was a fine old English gentleman.

Upon Avice once bringing the subject round to her grandfather, he cried :

"That's enough, girl—not a word about office or of him. I was a devil to the old man—I daren't think of that time. It's because of *that*, I can't bear to see Mother Badge—it knocks up the little nerves I have left, until I feel my head spinning round, and round, and round like a top. I wish she had shaken hands with me that day, though, Avice; but she wouldn't."

He shed a few tears over the reminiscence, as though Martha Badge had been his dearest friend in early youth, and was cruelly wronging him by her reserve.

Avice mentioned the wish of her uncle to Martha the next morning.

"Shake hands with him!" exclaimed Martha. "I don't think I could do it, my dear Avvy, to save his life. ~~He~~ killed his father—he knew that it would kill him when he broke into the office and robbed the place; I wonder you can bear to speak to him."

"I did not like him in his prosperity, when he was strong, and rough, and callous," replied Avice, "but in his weakness, Martha, in his loneliness, I cannot forget that he is my father's brother."

"Oh! Avice," cried Martha, with a sudden burst, "he isn't worthy you should think of him."

"My dear Martha, it is not right to bear such enmity towards him."

"He cursed his father's life—he was the millstone round his father's neck—old James Hern never had a single happy day after that man ran away from home, and—"

Martha Badge's vehemence was summarily put an end to by the entrance of Katie, who came to beg a holiday of Avice, in order that she might pay a visit to the little shop her father was about to open in one of the back London streets.

Late in the next week, Avice was at Walter Hern's house again, and patiently listening to a long-winded story with an immense amount of repetition that made it longer still, concerning a steeple-chase at Sanderstone, which "Arnold boy" won—his Arnold, who was going to live with a pack of savages in India.

The mention of India distracted his thoughts for a time, and he cried over the dangers to which his boy would be exposed, and wrung his hands in his distress, and hoped to God he'd come back safe to his poor father. He was afraid he wouldn't—he was afraid that he should never see him again.

An unexpected visitor arrived in the evening, no less a personage than Mr. Stanmore, a government secretary.

"You here, Avice!" he said, shaking hands with her. "Yet why should I doubt it, knowing your gentleness and charity?"

"She's a good girl, Mr. Stanmore," observed Walter. "There isn't a better woman in the world. She wouldn't come to see me when I was a great man; now, in my misfortune, when other people fall away, she stands by the sinking ship like an angel, Stanmore—like an angel! I didn't expect it from her; I didn't give her a thought."

"Perhaps not," said Stanmore. "But we confuse Avice by our praise. Well! how are you getting on, Hern?"

Hern answered, and the subject was changed.

Stanmore remained that evening till Avice rose to return.

"I will see you home, Avice," said he. "I do not admire our reckless habits of wandering about the streets alone. You are too confident, ward—I may call you ward still?"

"No one would harm me, Sir," replied Avice, colouring. "I—I—"

"I am going your way."

They bade Walter Hern good-night, and were shortly afterwards walking arm-in-arm through the lighted streets.

It was strange to be arm-in-arm with him again. It was very painful to Avice to note how he had changed since

Olverton House was given up for good—nay, how he had altered since he stood with her at the dying bed of his daughter.

Pale, his face furrowed, his eyes deep and thoughtful, his hair streaked with grey, and yet a man whose life should have been at its best—only a year or two past forty, the golden age of intellect and manhood, when all the follies of youth are gone, and the ills of life's decline have not yet come, and one is happy then or never.

"Hern has altered very much, Avice," remarked Stanmore. "I have seen such sudden wrecks of constitution in men apparently of great strength before."

"He misses his son."

"Yes," replied Stanmore, "but it is better for the son to be away from England and his old associates. There is a greater chance of reformation."

"Do you think that he will reform, Mr. Stanmore?"

"Not for a life-time, unless the life-time be short, or one of lingering illness," said he in reply.

"Poor Arnold!" sighed Avice, "so weak of resolution, so lacking in the power to persevere! But we may be mistaken this time, Sir."

"Let us hope so," said Stanmore. "And now, Avice, to another subject. You will think me a very restless, discontented man, when I tell you that *I* am going abroad."

"Going abroad, Sir?" faltered Avice.

"Yes, for a long time—for life!"

Avice felt her heart beating at a quicker rate, but she managed by a great effort to express her regret to hear of his intention.

"I fancy I shall make a great diplomatist, and that a foreign land will be a new scene of action for me," he said. "I find the government office wearing me to death. I must give it up. It is the life and enjoyment of the galley-slave."

"Do you go soon, Sir?"

"Six months, not before," said he. "What do you think of my project, Avice?"

"I am sorry to hear of it," said Avice. "It is one friend the less, and although I saw you but seldom, yet—yet—"

"Ah, Avice, you will find other claims upon your regard—dearer, nearer ones in a few months," interrupted he. "I

have nothing to remain for, now Rosamond is lost to me. Poor girl! she prophesied my best days were to come. I shall have to find them in a new land. Here, Avice, there is nothing but cruel memories."

"Can you evade those memories by leaving the source from which they have arisen?" asked Avice.

"No, no," said he, hastily, "but I may in part subdue them by an absence from the place of their origin, and some, God knows, I would not evade for all the world."

They were silent for a long time. It was an embarrassing as well as a painful topic of discourse, and they spoke no more concerning it.

"I will not come in to-night," said he, as they stood before the door of Miss Wrickerton's house. "I shall have to call and say farewell in a month or two."

As he extended his hand to her, he added :

"I should like to ask one question, Avice. You need not answer it, if it displease you."

"I will answer it," said Avice, looking down.

"How long will it be before this engagement between you and Clifton finds its happy termination?"

"What do you mean?" asked Avice in a low voice.

"You see each other very often, I know. He calls at your house; I take it for granted that you are re-engaged; therefore—"

"He came but once or twice; I have not seen him lately. Why wound me, Mr. Stanmore, by reference to his name?" she cried, almost passionately. "There has been no engagement—there cannot ever be one between him and me; it was all broken off at Sanderstone. I have told him so—he is aware of it."

"Avice!" he cried.

It was a low, stifled cry, but it welled up from the heart.

"Let me go in—I cannot bear to listen to you—to hear your voice," cried Avice, bursting into tears. "Mr. Stanmore, pray release my hand—don't speak to me now! Oh! I—I—am very miserable!"

"Avice, do hear me!" he implored.

"Not now—not now."

She disengaged her hand from his nervous clasp, and running up the steps of the house, knocked hurriedly at the door.

He made no movement to arrest her further progress, but stood watching her, as she tremblingly waited for the door to open and admit her. She did not know from what she was flying ; it was weak and very silly, but yet, how long they seemed in coming to let her in !

The dark door was soon between Stanmore and Avice Hern, although the former still remained waiting in the street. He paced up and down the pavement on that side of the square long afterwards. The rain began to fall, but he took no heed of it, and went on with his oscillatory progress, much to the perplexity of a policeman, who kept a wary eye upon him from an opposite corner.

He moved away at last, saying to himself :

“ It must be something that I dream not of—it must be. I dare not think of that which would brighten my remaining years. Fool, fool that I am to lose my self-command, my moral courage, by a few faltering words from her pure lips. God bless her ! it is not for an old fellow like to me to win upon her in his dotage. I am not such a dreamer as to believe it. And yet !—Well, one more cruel memory then, Stanmore, it can be borne with the many that have gone before it. Only one more, and that to-morrow ! ”

One more !—he was right !

CHAPTER III.

THE GREAT LESSON.

THERE was a knocking at the door underneath the doctor's red lamp in the Hampstead Road that night, for Walter Hern was taken very ill. So ill, so weak and helpless as to make yesterday's feebleness and dotage appear, by comparison, his day of strength and power. He only wanted yesterday's vigour now to be able to leave his bed and go down stairs—oh ! to be able to go down stairs again, and sit with his comfortable palsy at the parlour window.

Was he going to die ? Good God ! doctor, don't say that he was breaking up—that there were doubts of his getting over it, he was very weak but then he wasn't an old man—not such a very old man—why his own father had lived over seventy years and more—only think of that !

Had Walter Hern's life depended on a nod or sign from the doctor at his bed-side, he could not have begged more for his aid and mercy in his time of sickness.

He was left with a hope of ultimate recovery, with injunctions to keep up his spirits as well as he could under the circumstances, and to be sure that he had a careful nurse. Walter Hern broke into a passionate fit of sobbing after the doctor had taken his departure.

"Keep up his spirits. Ke—ke—eep up his spirits," he cried hysterically, "in a dismal house with an ugly old woman to wait upon him, and Arnold boy away in India. Ca—ca—careful nurse! Who would nurse him with care? what had he ever done for anybody that he should be ta—ta—taken care of? He must die—he must die!"

All that weary morning he lay in his bed with the ugly old woman aforesaid hovering about the room. All that long morning he lay crying like a child, shivering at the hideous retrospect of a mis-spent life which was unrolling before him like a map. Then the awful Future which might be nearer than the doctor told him, which he shrank and cowered from, and held up his hands, and would have given worlds not to think about, and which he thought about all the more in trying his hardest to forget.

What should he do in a long illness with no friends to call upon him and sit by his bed-side? Would it not be death by slow degrees to lie on his back day after day, and stare at the flaming pattern on the walls? To have only the doctor to see him once a day, and Avice perhaps but once a week! Ah! Avice—if he had only been a better man in his time, she might have even come to nurse her poor old uncle—who's that?

Avice Hern herself emerging from the shadow of the room, and drawing aside the curtains of his bed. Avice in her morning dress, without her bonnet, with the bunch of housekeeping keys at her girdle. Avice evidently at home.

"Niece, is anything the matter? How did you know I was ill? Did the woman send? What—what does it mean?"

He lay glaring at his niece as at a ghost.

"Mrs. Simpson sent a message to me the first thing this morning."

"And you have come to see me—it's kind," he muttered,

"and you've left your bonnet and shawl in the other room ; that looks very well, he, he!—that looks very well indeed."

"Supposing I have come for a long stay here, uncle," said Avice in a cheering voice, "you have often told me that there was a spare room for my accommodation."

He gave a piteous whimpering look up in her face.

"I used to be fond of a joke, Avice ; I could stand them as rough as anybody once, but please don't now, there's a good girl. I'm an old man and very, very ill now—see here, how I am shaking in the bed."

"Supposing me to be in earnest, uncle."

"Ay, ay, earnest. Oh ! Avice, upon my soul it's too bad to make such fun of me !"

Walter Hern began to wipe his eyes.

"Well, I have come then—there !"

"For how long ?" he screamed out. "God reward you, girl—for how long ?"

"For good," was the reply, "until you tell your niece to go away."

"Oh ! Avice—oh ! niece," cried he, giving way to an outburst of weeping, "it's not to be believed, a wretch like me, a man without a soul—a villain, girl, a villain ! Go home again and leave me here. I don't deserve this. Oh ! go home again."

He caught at the hand by his side and retained it in his own as if he were afraid she would take him at his word.

He got over his weeping after a minute and said :

"What made you think of this ?"

"I will tell you," she replied, seating herself by the bedside, "and you must listen calmly or I shall go down stairs, and leave you till the evening. I heard that you were ill—I knew you were lying here without one friend or relation in England but me. You are the son of that dear old grandfather who offered me the shelter of his home when I was a little girl—my father was your brother. If I can be of service to you in your loneliness, or take my place as nurse, or with God's help teach you the great lesson which you have never heeded since your childhood, there is no sacrifice too great for me to make. I have come to share your home, to be your daughter, to think and live for you in your old age—there be still, I'll say no more."

She ran out of the room, and left him with the wet tears

on his furrowed cheeks. She had chosen a hard task, but she had chosen well and like a heroine, and had spared no sacrifice in doing that which she believed was right.

And was there no sacrifice in writing to Mr. Arthur William Stanmore that very morning, in resolving to forget him then for ever, and to live for one whose whole life had been selfishness and crime? He was her uncle—he was alone in the world—he was lost to that knowledge without which the greatest wisdom of the earth is nothing. She had detected in him lately some softening of his iron nature, she would make one great effort to bring him to repentance.

So she parted with Miss Wrickerton and honest Martha, who cried one on each shoulder in the hall, left a formal note for Mr. Stanmore acquainting him with her intentions—the colder and more formal now the better!—and went, with Katie Millthorn, to her new home in the Hampstead Road.

It is not our purpose to dwell upon the long illness of Walter Hern, or of the struggle for life in that sick room with Avice—true ministering angel, never tiring in her watch, or weary of her task!—or of the new duties she had set herself to perform. It is enough to say that Walter Hern got well enough to leave his room, and found heart enough to love Avice like a daughter, and upheld by the consciousness of her duty, Avice gave no thought to regrets, and looked no longer forward for herself. She did not deem it a sacrifice of her young life, or that she was repaying good for evil, she knew alone that he was changing for the better; he was some one distinct from the Walter Hern of Sanderstone, and still more unlike that burly ruffian who came to the office near Whitehall one winter time, and demanded money to support him in his idleness.

Her own affectionate nature began to flow towards him; she almost loved him for his weakness, his helplessness, his implicit trust in her, and she stood by his side to grace his home, and cheer him in old age.

His weakness had subdued his nature, and made a coward of him; but it was left for Avice to strike upon the callous heart, and to awaken him to a sense of the position in which he stood towards One who had mercifully spared him yet a little while.

As the time went on, and the place became a home to

Avice, the tie that linked uncle and niece became more powerful, and its influence began to assert itself on Walter Hern.

It was a strange sight to watch the rapid growth of this man's love for Avice, to note his reverence for the slight figure that flitted about his home, that sat by his side, that tried to interest him in subjects of which he had scarcely heard the name. Their natural positions were reversed—it was age, supported by youth's counsel, and led by its advice ; it was the youth which taught the holy lesson to be learned, and pointed out the way which had never yet been trodden.

Avice had a struggle to bring the light upon the darkened understanding of Walter Hern, for it was preaching to a frightened child of mercy and forgiveness, and was a long arduous task.

But she did not flinch at the difficulties before her, she was not eternally pressing upon him the duties of religion at times and seasons when he was too ill to bear them, or too peevish and fretful to be consoled by them ; she watched her opportunity, and led him by imperceptible degrees to talk of hope, to listen to her in reply, and as he grew stronger, she was comforted by witnessing a result from her teaching slowly dawning on him.

He had learned to love her, we have said, but his great fear was, that she would leave him, and growing tired of her task, would steal down stairs one of these nights, and run away. He told her so, he begged her every time she bade him good-night, not to leave him till the morning, and no assurance she could make, was able to divert him from that same impression.

He could not bear to trust her from his sight, and if she went to see Miss Wrickerton and Martha Badge, he would sit at the window looking in the street till her return, never moving from the one position he had chosen, paying no heed to the day's decline, the dusky night, the solitary lamp gleaming across the road, thinking of nothing but his dear niece, Avice.

When he was well enough to leave the house, uncle and niece took a walk together, every afternoon ; he leaning on Avice's arm and plodding on by its aid, and that of a gold-mounted stick, a relic of his past grandeur, which he had brought from Sanderstone.

They were slow weary walks on the sunshiny side of the way, and always in the vicinity of Walter Hern's house; either round the squares, some of them in course of formation, and full of bricklayers and carpenters, who peeped at them, from staring window holes and roofs of unfinished houses, and who thought them a queer couple, and wondered what on earth was the matter with the old gentleman—or along the bustling Hampstead Road itself, Hern interested in every horse that passed, and pointing it out with his stick to Avice, tracing at the same time a fancied resemblance to some steed or other he had had at "The Hall" and crying over the striking likeness.

Sometimes when Hern was very feeble, they went out for long country drives in the carriage with Miss Wrickerton, but those trips were finally abandoned, they made Hern so low-spirited on his return. In one of those drives, he had begged to be taken into the City, and put down at the corner of a certain street, which he indicated with his stick. Leaving Miss Wrickerton in the carriage to await their return, Avice had led him, he pointing out the way, to the famed coffee-house at which the Hall was sold.

"That's the place, Avice," he said; "it was knocked down there a dead bargain—that's the very place."

Fresh bills were in the window, fresh people hanging about the doors, there was another great estate coming to the hammer—another ruined man going to the dogs.

Walter Hern was worse when he reached home that afternoon than he had been since his recovery, but he picked up again the next day, and took his customary walk on the sunshiny side of the street, and pointed out as many horses as ever, with his gold-mounted stick.

During the long evenings, Avice still persevered with her task. She had accustomed him to hear a chapter in the Bible read every night, and it seemed to work an improvement in him, although he generally finished with, "Ah! it isn't meant for me—it's much too late for me!"

"It is never too late, uncle."

"Yes, it is—don't tell me that," he cried peevishly; "put the book away till to-morrow, Avice."

One Sunday morning Avice tried to persuade him to accompany her to church. He laughed at that—it was so out of his style—excepting the day Arnold boy was married

at Branscombe, he hadn't seen the inside of a church for a long, long time—no, no, Avice,—he wasn't going there!

But the second Sunday after his refusal, when Avice came down from her room, there he was waiting for her, with hat and stick in hand.

"Are you going out, uncle?"

"I'm going with you."

"With me!" cried Avice, "to church!"

"You said you'd like me to go," said he ruefully. "I'll go. I know I shan't like it; but never mind for once."

Walter Hern went for more than once or twice; he went every Sunday morning with his niece, and tried his best to pay attention to the sermon, although he cried when he got home sometimes, because he had not understood a word of it—because his mind would keep wandering away to Arnold or the Hall.

There came a letter from Arnold in the beginning of autumn, a long letter about India and his prospects—telling how, with his old love for change, he had resigned his office and entered the army, and how he hoped to win honour in the Indian war, which was breaking out in earnest, and to redeem the past by becoming a good man and a brave soldier. He had not left off trying, he could tell everybody that!

Avice and her uncle studied the newspapers now Arnold was a soldier, and there were signs of coming war, and looked at all the news from India, and traced the march of a certain regiment from post to post upon the map, they trembling more and more as it advanced nearer to the enemy.

Mr. Stanmore called one day to see Avice and Walter Hern.

Avice had not seen Mr. Stanmore since the evening he had escorted her home, and made inquiry concerning her engagement. He had called the following day, and taken away with him Avice's formal note, and she had received a few days afterwards a hurriedly written reply, which stated the writer's intention to shortly visit her and her uncle, and expressed his opinion of her determination very highly, and was in many places undecipherable or incoherent.

Avice had looked for his visit night after night, had been startled by every knock, had listened to footsteps echoing

in the street, had drawn the blind aside, and peered through the window to see if he were coming—had so wished to see him once again—but once !

She had resolved upon her course of action, and that was to teach him to forget her. There was but one way to do that effectually ; to crush out any lingering hopes that might remain, and so, with a marble hand upon her heart, she set herself that task on the night he came to the house in the Hampstead Road.

Never failing in her deep respect to him, she yet was reserved and somewhat taciturn, demonstrating with all her force of will the fallacy of thinking more about her, showing how she had resolved to live for her uncle, and him only—how she thought and cared for no one else !

Stanmore attributed Avice's cold demeanour to his unguarded moments in the square, to the fear of another avowal of love from his lips, and so locked up the secret desire of his heart again, and gave up the chase ! It was of no avail—he saw at last she was too young, and he too old—she loved him not, and he loved her too well—lower the veil over the old story and cast aside all weak emotions for this once, and ever, and look the future in the face. This strange man under government went away that night with teeth close set, and brows bent heavily ; he lingered not outside the house, but strode home to Great George Street, Westminster, without once looking back. He bade her adieu that night although he was not going to leave England for several months—a delay having arisen and the time for his departure being consequently extended—but he thought that it would be better to say good-bye at once ; “business affairs,” “the hurry of leaving,” might preclude another opportunity, and so—good-bye !

Oh ! the “good think” Avice had that night sitting in her own room, with the hands, as a matter of course, before the face. She had played her part, and he had gone—they might not see each other again—it did not seem likely that they ever would—one more figure from the landscape, one less ray of sunshine on her path.

Away ! live in the present, the past is dark, and the future full of shadows—think of the great effort, and keep all other memories in the distance.

There fell a faint light on this shadowy future.

One night, a week after Mr. Stanmore's visit, Hern laid aside some books with coloured plates, relics from the Hall, "Boxiana," and "Lives of Horses," &c., at Avice's desire, and sat with his shaking hands clasped together, listening to the Bible. When Avice had closed the Book, he said, without adverting to the subject which had been selected for the evening's discourse :

"Stanmore's going abroad, isn't he, Avice ? "

"Yes."

"What part ? "

"I do not know, uncle."

"I wonder if he remembers the robbery ? "

It was the first time that Hern of his own free will had commented on any incident before the days of his country life, much less such an incident as he had chosen now.

"The—the robbery," said Avice. "Do, do you mean at Whitehall ? "

"At the office, yes."

"Oh! don't talk of that, dear uncle."

"Yes I will, and I'll tell you why."

Avice waited patiently for his explanation.

"I'll tell you, Avice, because I feel glad I was deceived, and—and humbugged—because my pals stole a march upon me, and left me in the lurch—because I didn't rob the place."

"You—you did not ! " cried Avice, sinking slowly to his feet, in order to gaze more earnestly into his face, and read the truth upon it. "Oh ! uncle, uncle, tell me you did not again ! "

"No, Avice, my girl," said Hern, shaking his head with a grave air of indignation, "they heard my plans and propositions—they coincided perfectly with everything—they dodged about the house with me for weeks, and then they sacked the place themselves."

"Mercy ! mercy ! "

"Good God ! what's the matter ? " cried the startled Hern. "What is it, Avice, dear—what is it ? "

"Don't talk like that—don't regret the loss of that guilty wealth," implored Avice, with streaming eyes ; "not this reward for all my prayers, my hope for you ! "

"Right, right, Avice," he said quickly, "I told you I was

glad a moment ago—so I am, girl, so I am. I only meant to say it was a shabby trick they played me : but I wasn't in the robbery itself, and I'm glad of it, Avice. That's one sin the less against me, mind you."

"He complacently rubbed his nervous hands together and smiled at the candle, and congratulated himself in "being out of that !"

"The sin was not the less," murmured Avice ; "you showed the way, you pointed out the house."

"That's the worst of it," continued Hern. "I'm afraid that may go against me up there, Avice, eh ? "

"God forgive you ! "

"But there's more to be considered," said Hern, rubbing his hands again, "two days before—after all my plans had been arranged, I turned chicken-hearted, Avice—I who was a big burly fellow then, think of that ! I had never robbed but a sixpence or two at a time, when I was hard up and starving, so when it came to the push, I began to think of—father ? "

"You did ! "

"Upon my soul I did ! " cried Hern ; "upon my soul, Avice, I went to the *school* and said the whole thing should be stashed—I wouldn't kill the old man in that fashion, or throw him overboard ; I stole his money when a boy, that was bad enough—but I swore I would not ruin him for life. I nearly broke his heart once—I couldn't quite, Avice. That's better, isn't it ? "

"Yes, yes—and they ? "

"Admired my principles, and made me drunk—a bad lot, my dear," said Hern, "so they stashed it in their way, and robbed the office and went to America. I didn't turn against them, though there was the sum of five hundred pounds offered as inducement—my name would about have settled my old father, mentioned in any way or shape, and I should have done myself a deal of harm, and perhaps have lost the money after all. *He* didn't think I had a hand in it, did he, Avice ? "

Avice made no reply.

"You did ? "

"What else could I think, uncle ? "

"Well, it did look suspicious at the time," said Hern ; "but not when I came to Sanderstone ; you did not think so

then, Avice? It wouldn't have been quite safe or wise, if I had been the fellow in the job, to have remained in England. Why, the detectives are so conf—"

He caught Avice's glance, and drifted slowly to another subject, and shortly after, began to ramble in his speech, and talk of Arnold. As his excitement became less, he grew faint and drowsy, and finally dozed off in his chair, with Avice at his feet. Avice sat gazing at his face, as he lightly slumbered.

"Oh! spare him to me," she cried, looking upwards, with a holy light, as it were, in her large lustrous eyes. "Leave him with me—he is learning to repent—he is not wholly bad. Strike him not down ere he has prayed for pardon, All Merciful and Wise!"

"Did you speak, Avice?" said he, waking up.

"To you, uncle?—No."

"Have I been sleeping long?"

"Only a minute."

"I don't mind hearing another chapter in the Book, girl," he said, "about the sinners, Avice. I like that chapter best."

When she had concluded it, he muttered his old words "Too late!" and dozed away the remainder of the evening.

A few mornings after this, Avice, who had left him for a few minutes at a signal from Katie Millthorn, returned, and said to him:

"Father, here's a very old friend come to see you."

"Not Arnold?" cried he, his colour changing.

"No; an older friend than he."

"To see me," said Hern; "it can't be—Mrs. Badge?"

"Yes."

"To see *me*, too," said Hern; "let her come in. Oh! dear."

Martha Badge entered, walked steadily towards him, and dropped after her upright fashion into a chair, by the same window at which he was sitting.

"Well, Walter Hern, I've come."

"In good part?"

"I shouldn't have come in ill," said Martha; "how are you?"

"Poorly, poorly."

"I haven't come to dwell upon what's gone," said Martha Badge, "you know as well as I do what a son you were to him."

"Ay, ay," answered Hern, shaking his head.

"I've come to say how glad I am to hear you didn't rob that office after all, and that at the eleventh hour you tried to stop it."

"Like all my attempts—too late !"

"I wonder you didn't turn a better man after that, Walter."

It was the first time those sharp, thin lips had called him Walter since he was a boy. He held out his trembling hand.

Martha took it for a moment, in sign of reconciliation.

"Better man," repeated Hern, "ah ! you don't know how hard it is for the bad to turn back !"

"Avice tells me you are trying now"

"God bless her ! how good she is."

Mrs. Badge forgave Walter Hern all the indignities he had cast upon her in time past from that very moment. He had blessed her Avvy ; he was not so bad, after all !

Avice joined them at the window, and the remainder of the day was spent in cheering up Walter Hern. In the evening, after Mrs. Badge had gone back to Miss Wrickerton, Walter said :

"She's been a queer old girl in her life, Avice ; blundering a bit, perhaps, but a good servant—a woman of the right sort. It has never struck me before, how Martha has fagged her life out for the Herns, or what a help and comfort she must have been to the old man, after the sons dropped away from him and left him all alone. I used to hate her—now she puts me so in mind of that time when I was a boy, that it upsets me quite."

He began to look disconsolate, and to threaten a fit of his childish sobbing, so Avice brought the Bible, and began to read to him.

So, whilst Walter Hern grew stronger, and paid more attention to his lesson, Avice sat by his side, cheering his heart and his home, and Time—inexorable Time—swept onwards with the tide, waiting for no man.

CHAPTER IV

"ARNOLD BOY."

AUTUMN had scarcely passed into winter, ere there came a letter, written to the dictation of Arnold Hern in India.

There had been a battle fought, and a British victory gained. There had been a host of killed and wounded, too, and amongst the latter was Walter's son.

"I am progressing favourably," the letter said, "but I must lose my left arm, leave the service, and take to a quieter life. Mr. Stanmore told me once that I should never reform unless some great calamity stretched me on my back for a month or two, and thus afforded me time to reflect on the past, and consider the waste I had made of it.

"Mr. Stanmore was right. I am thinking seriously, for the first time, of what a wretch I have been, and what a study I have ever made of self, and—self only! I am thinking what a different world I might have existed in, and what a home I might have reared for myself and—for *her*!

"It is torture, but it may work a change even in me. I have received Avice's letter; tell her from me how good and kind I know she is, for all the self-depreciation in her letter, and how I value her more upon this wounded soldier's couch, than ever I did in all my life!

"I am pained to hear of your illness, father—I am concerned about it: ask the doctor what he thinks of a change of climate, and whether you may come to 'Arnold boy.' I believe 'Arnold boy' would know how to take care of you now, if he never did before.

"Moreover, there is another reason which, if I had not been where I am, would possibly have escaped my notice. Avice Hern must not be sacrificed to us—must not devote the best days of her young life to cheer your declining years. I have been thinking a great deal lately, and I fancy I have discovered a most important secret concerning—*somebody*."

Avice who was reading the letter aloud, stopped here and

blushed. Walter Hern, whose face had lengthened at his son's advice, said, wonderingly :

"What does he mean?"

"How am I to know, uncle?"

"He was always very sharp," murmured he. "He means more than he says, I know. But go on with the letter." Avice continued.

"So this something which Avice, perhaps, has smothered for the Herns' sake, must have its weight too; and you must come to me, or I to you. Avice is too young to be your nurse, you have no claim upon her, it is not right. Come if your health will allow. I have already been offered a fair appointment in Malta, and if you will join me, I will accept it."

The letter said more, and there was that in its whole tone which proved the old proverb that, "it is good for us to be afflicted," and that from our calamities we may reap a harvest which in the days of our strength we should have recklessly trampled under foot.

Arnold did not allude to the brave action which had lost him an arm, gained him the esteem of his fellow officers, and had given his name to the world. That was the surest proof he was thinking less of himself, although it was a proud day for him to know that his name had gone forth to his country. "God desert him," he murmured, on his couch as he lay wounded and faint, but with a full heart, "if he ever did ought to tarnish it again!"

"Oh, for the past—give him but the past! Let him come home now and marry Rosamond, and make her a happy husband!"

Alas! if man only braced his energies, and looked up to his God in the prime of his youth and his strength, ere the will and the lust and the crime have gone forth to devour!

Although Avice assured her uncle that her life devoted to him was no sacrifice, that she was repaid for her time, her watchings, her anxiety, by seeing him a better man, yet was Walter Hern troubled very much by Arnold's letter. He thought about it deeply; he loved his Arnold boy; but for Avice there was a tender and more powerful feeling which had been born out of her solicitude for him. Still it *was* a sacrifice; he was getting old, and she was young;

what had he ever done that he should seek to keep her by his side ? and what had she not done for him ?

She had resigned a great deal for his sake, and he, after a long conference with Mrs. Badge, whom he took into his confidence, resolved to resign her in return, and go to his brave Arnold boy. He would never, never, forget her—ki—ki—kindness !

He set about his plans on the instant, in the fear lest consideration should terrify him to retract. He would hear nothing Avice had to urge ; he was going to await his son Arnold's coming at Malta ; and in less than a fortnight, he was ready to say farewell.

"Two or three years ago, Avice would not have dreamed of the pain of such a parting, or have believed it would have ever been so great a struggle to let him go his way alone. Her loving heart had begun to beat for him too, almost as for a father, and now he would not have her accompany him, he would not hear of it for an instant. "Wait a year or two more, and then if you are in the same mind, all well and good !"

They separated, and Walter Hern's remembrance of Avice never grew less faint ; but served to support him in the right track, after the great sea was rolling between him and his gentle teacher.

Let us leave Walter Hern and Arnold boy thus. They are still living and learning to repent, and the stranger who comes by chance upon the father and son at Malta, and is led to observe their gentle bearing, their kindness and attention to each other, would vainly guess their history and former character, or deem the even tenor of their present life had been ever preceded by such lowering storms.

B O O K X.

"We are now, reader, arrived at the last stage of our long journey."

FIELDING'S "TOM JONES."

Book XVIII. Chap.

CHAPTER I.

A PROMISE TO BE KEPT.

IF we look back upon that Road in Life along which we have plodded to our manhood, how many landmarks left behind do we find made up of the graves of those we have loved? How many friends have we parted with in our journey up the hill, little dreaming that they vanished away for ever when we shook hands and said "good-bye!" Happy is he who, standing on the mound and looking back, can say, "I see no graves of father, mother, friends; those dear ones are around me still, they give me cheering words, they hold my hands in theirs; my path has been a smooth one to this spot, from which the life of action takes its spring towards the world, and no dead hearts or hopes or loves shadow its sunny track."

It has not been thus with Avice. There are many graves to number, many disappointments and sorrows which make a grave of the heart, and there is but little sunshine on the track beyond that she can see or hope for. Still she journeys calmly onwards faithful and enduring, full of that trust in Him which men, alas! so often throw aside, and which in a good woman grows more strong with each adversity, enabling her who suffers.

Avice is back again at the house in the square, the old life has begun once more, Miss Wrickerton and Martha Badge are her companions by the fireside, and Katie Millthorn is her maid.

She has not seen Mr. Stanmore since he came to visit her at her uncle's house. He bade her "good-bye" then for the last time!

Stanmore is very busy now in London, and his stay is short indeed; but could he not call and see Avice once more in lieu of spending his leisure moments in moody reverie before his winter's fire, trying to read his future in its lurid depths?

Perhaps such a question as this rises to his mind on these occasions, for more than once he has started from his seat, seized his hat and hurried into the street, to return after a

few minutes, and sink into his old brooding posture, with an angry shake of the head at his impulsive nonsense.

He is very busy though. He rides on horseback all the day, calling at place after place, at his bankers', at his lawyer's, at his office, at the Treasury, at Downing Street, at his lawyer's again, at his club, everywhere but at the house wherein waits patient Avica.

Affairs are all finally arranged and settled, and Avica reads in a newspaper that Mr. Arthur William Stanmore has accepted an important office abroad, and will immediately depart.

Mr. Arthur William Stanmore gives a farewell dinner party to two or three old friends, at his house in Great George Street, and there is much toasting of the worthy host, and plenty of expressions of a fair voyage, good health and long years, and a profuse returning of thanks for this "the happiest moment of his life!"

The old friends go away early in the evening, and Stanmore draws nearer to his fire, spreads his white hands before it, and does not look the most cheerful individual in the world, notwithstanding all his fine speeches, and the very grand dinner by which they have been preceded.

Busy, still busy all the next day, superintending the packing up of half a hundred boxes, bags, and portmanteaux, and winding up the evening by writing half a hundred letters to one person, each of which, after a second perusal, he tears into the smallest possible pieces, and drops into the waste-basket.

He gives over the task in despair.

"Why should I write a long, dreary, morbid epistle to wound her feelings, or attempt to arouse her interest in me?" says he, as he locks his desk, "better to go away and make no sign. Heigho! it all will be over in six more days. I shall spend my Christmas on the sea."

Busy, very busy during those six more days, going down to Sanderstone, paying a visit to old Sanderstone churchyard, coming back again, wandering about the government offices, taking melancholy rides to Richmond, passing once or twice in the dusk of the evening Miss Wrickerton's mansion, and glancing up at its windows rather earnestly.

The day before the going away comes round in due course

and Stanmore rides out in the afternoon, and takes his parting look at London.

"To-morrow, there will be an end of this—I shall be gone to-morrow," he murmurs, forgetting that the boaster of the morrow knoweth not what the day may bring forth, to put a check upon his projects.

That check is roughly made, and Avice on the morrow drops the newspaper, and gives an involuntary cry.

"My dear child," cries Miss Wrickerton, "what is it?"

"More misfortune for her—I shouldn't wonder," affirms Mrs. Badge; "it seems to me as if—"

Avice picks up the paper, saying:

"He has met with a serious accident."

"He—who?"

"Mr. Stanmore, my dear guardian—what shall I do now? —Oh! my guardian!"

She reads the paragraph aloud, with a faltering voice:

"We regret to hear that Mr. Stanmore, who has been recently appointed *Chargé d'Affaires*, at — has met with a severe accident, which will even, under the most favourable circumstances, totally incapacitate him for the next few months from resuming his diplomatic duties. Mr. Stanmore was thrown from his horse yesterday afternoon, and we learn that the esteemed gentleman has received the most serious injuries in consequence. It was the intention of Mr. Stanmore to have taken his departure on the morning of the present day."

"Poor gentleman!" observes Miss Wrickerton, "but I hope this paragraph may be an exaggeration."

"Ah! them papers!" reproachfully adds Martha.

Avice turns the newspaper over in her hand, and makes no comment. Soon after she leaves the house, and goes straight to Great George Street, Westminster. There is a doctor's carriage at the door of Mr. Stanmore's mansion, and straw is laid a foot deep in the roadway. It is too true—he is severely injured!

With a beating heart she hurries to the door, and knocks.

The man who opens the door is an old domestic from understone, and his anxious face lights up at the apparition at the door-step.

"Miss Hern!" he says.

"Yes, yes," she replies hoarsely, "your master—Mr. Stanmore, is he much hurt?"

"A broken arm—a dislocated shoulder too, Miss," he answers. "It gave us all a dreadful shock. Won't you come in, Miss Hern?"

"Not now," she answers, "I must go back, now. How is Mr. Stanmore this morning?"

"Not quite so well, Miss, I'm sorry to say," he says, "he's had a bad night. There's two doctors with him now, Miss. Won't you step in, and wait till they come down?"

"No, no," says Avice shrinking back, "I will come in an hour or so—and see my guardian. I—I will not be long."

She darts away, and hurries to her home. In the few minutes which elapse, before she is at the house in the square, she has made up her mind as to what course to pursue—her deep feeling for the sufferer, their old relation of guardian and ward (not suitor and maiden), the promise made to Rosamond on that sad Christmas morning, allow none other—she will go to him and take her rightful place of watch.

"Will you go if he be sick or ill, and rescue him from the horror of strange unsympathising faces round his couch—will you tend him as you would tend a father or a husband?"

It was the last promise Rosamond had asked her to fulfil and she had answered "Yes!"

No matter for the world, cold, harsh, uncharitable as it is ever in its calculations, she will be his nurse and watcher, as she has been her uncle's. Who else had so great a right as Wildflower?

Flushed and excited, she makes her entry into the room where Miss Wrickerton and Martha are still seated.

"I'm going away again," she says, "I must go to him—he will die, perhaps, and without me by his side. He is in deep affliction, and my presence may help to soothe it—it would have done so once, I pray it may do so now in its hour of need. He is very ill—he! I must go—I must go!"

Before either lady can reply, Avice is in her own room packing one of her boxes with her trembling hands.

Katie stands wistfully regarding the proceeding, and unable longer to control her curiosity, asks "if Miss Hern is going to leave them?"

"You must come with me, Katie," says Avice, without

looking up. "Put your bonnet on, and get ready a few things."

"Is there any further news of—Mr. Arnold?"

"No, no," answers Avice, "but do not put questions to me, but get ready. I am in haste, Katie—I am going away."

"To be married, Miss?" inquires the wondering Katie.

"Ah! Katie, do not jest at such a time as this," says Avice, feeling very much inclined to burst into tears; "do I—I—look much like a—bride!"

CHAPTER II.

ONCE MORE.

It was the afternoon of the same day, and Stanmore, pale and haggard, lay in his bed. A portly gentleman was standing by the bed-side, and drawing on his gloves.

"You'll do, Mr. Stanmore," said he, in a cheerful tone; "we shall make a man of you in a week or two, depend upon it, Sir."

"In a week or two I shall be well?" asked Stanmore.

"Hem!" said the doctor, "not exactly that, my dear Sir. In a week or two we shall find you looking brave again."

"How long before I can leave the house, Mr. Grames?"

"Oh! not long—not long after that."

"In a month or two, I suppose?" he suggested.

"Ah!—ah! perhaps before."

"And I am to drag on a life of misery like this for months?" said Stanmore, bitterly; "consoled by drugs and doctor's visits."

"And the visits of friends, Mr. Stanmore," said Mr. Grames, still drawing on his gloves. "We do not interdict friends, you know."

"Friends!" answered Stanmore, with a curling lip; "you may interdict them all!"

"Now, about the nurse—has she come?"

"I don't know—I hope not," answered Stanmore. "I require no nurse waiting upon me—let one of the servants—"

"My dear Sir, you must allow me to know best," said Dr. Grames, rather petulantly.

"Well, well," closing his eyes, "do as you like."

"I shall look in again in the evening, Mr. Stanmore," said the doctor; "you must keep calm and not give way."

There was a grim smile on the pale lips of the sick man at this admonition.

After a few more words, Dr. Grames left Mr. Stanmore to his meditations. Dr. Grames was standing on the hall mat, referring to his note-book, when he was somewhat startled by finding a young lady of small stature at his side.

"How is Mr. Stanmore, Sir?" she asked anxiously.

"He—he is getting on favourably, Miss," replied the doctor. "A little feverish—that's all. I do not think we shall have much trouble with his arm, or shoulder."

"Would it disturb him much to see me, Sir?"

"See you," replied the doctor. "You—you are—?"

"His ward."

"Certainly not, certainly not; do him good," said the bustling doctor; "but I'd better prepare him—one moment."

And before Avice could reply, he had run up the stairs, and entered the room again.

"Here's friend Number One, Mr. Stanmore," said the doctor; "don't talk about a life of misery, my dear Sir. Here's Number One."

"Send him away. I am too ill to see him," said Stanmore, peevishly.

"It's a lady."

"What!"

"Fact, my dear Sir; don't look shocked," and the medical gentleman gave a chuckle of some length.

"Who is it?" asked Stanmore, in a low tone.

"Your ward."

Stanmore turned a shade more pale, but made no answer.

"Should you like to see her?"

"Yes," he replied, slowly.

"I thought I would prepare you first, for—"

"Thank you—thank you."

Dr. Grames retired, and left Stanmore lying in his bed, with an anxious pair of eyes directed towards the door.

It was some time before the door opened, but the sick man kept his gaze fixed in one direction, and waited patiently.

There was a slight trembling figure in the room at last. It advanced slowly to the bed-side.

"Avice, is it you?"

"Yes, guardian."

"I cannot offer you a hand in welcome, Avice," said he. "You must come in three weeks or so for that."

Avice tried to smile.

"This is very kind of you, Avice," added he; "I did not expect that you would hear of it so soon."

"I read of your accident in the newspaper," said Avice. "But, surely, you would have sent some one to inform me, Mr. Stanmore?"

"Not I," he answered. "You would not have received the tidings with stoical indifference, I am vain enough to believe, Avice. It might have been a shock to you, and—and I would have spared you it."

"That would have been unkind."

"Why?"

"It would have been unkind to keep me in ignorance of your accident," said she; "to have led me by your silence to believe that you had gone abroad, and yet—yet lying here ill without a friend."

"What can a friend do for me—even Avice Hern?"

"She will do all in her power."

"She *will*?" he asked, with a dubious look.

"Yes, she will," said Avice. "She has come to stay here—to tend her guardian—to do her best to cheer his sick room."

A red flush swept across his face.

"It cannot be, Avice," he said, huskily. "I do not wish it even for myself. Leave me to others who are provided for me. Spare yourself the pain of such a task."

"No pain—no pain."

"You must go away, Avice," he urged. "I could not bear to see you by my side—you do not know how—"

"Hush," said Avice, "you are exciting yourself, and that is not right, I am sure. Will you listen to me quietly?"

"Yes."

"Let me explain, guardian," continued she, "let me relate all the motives which have led me hither, and then if you say 'No,' I will go back."

"Will you be seated, Avice?"

Avice took the vacant chair by the bed-side and again resumed.

"Firstly, I have come to redeem a promise made to poor Rosamond on that Christmas morning. I have come," holding up her finger by way of caution as he gave an involuntary start, "to watch you in your time of illness as she would have done had it been God's will to have spared her to this day—no one a greater right, dear Sir, than I, your ward."

"Poor Rosamond," he murmured, "she remembered her father, then, in that dying hour, but—"

"But hear me out," interrupted Avice; "had this promise never been made or asked, it would have been my first thought, my only care. I—I could not be happy away from this house, knowing that you were ill within it."

She turned away her head as she concluded to hide the rising blush. He lay earnestly regarding her.

"Wildflower—Avice," said he in a tremulous voice, "I did not expect this from you."

"Am I to stop?"

"If it be your wish, stay in God's name," he said quickly. "I—I never deemed that it would be left for you to gladden my weary days of lingering illness. It is out of my power to give you thanks for it."

"Do not try."

"I can say 'daughter' now, Avice," he said with a faint smile; "you take a daughter's place beside me, you cheer a father's heart. Farewell, silly romance of a maudlin old man, who, in his folly, cast aside the pure love of a daughter for the chimera of a visionary, and let peace come at last—I think it will!"

Presently he seemed inclined to sleep, so Avice rose and glided from the room leaving him to his repose.

Dr. Grames came early in the evening, and a nurse came late. The nurse had little to do, but doze away her time, and keep watch occasionally at night, for Stanmore would not be tended by any one but Avice.

The second day after Avice had installed herself in Great

George Street, Westminster, a fever set in which threw the sick man back, and caused great anxiety for his safety in the minds of Dr. Grames and other physicians who were sent for. It lasted five whole days and nights, and Avice but left his bed-side at times for a half-hour's sleep or so on the couch in the dreary formal drawing-room. Even on these occasions she was often aroused by the nurse coming in and waking her with :

"He wants you, Miss—he is asking for you."

One night he was delirious, and lay burning in his bed, and glaring with meaningless eyes at the young maiden who watched by him. The nurse was sound asleep and snoring in an adjoining room.

It was a painful time for Avice to listen to his rambling speech, to hear from his lips what a hope she had been to him all his life, and how that hope had at last foundered for ever. He talked of her all that long night, but as one wholly lost to him, as one to whom he dared not speak again of love.

"She must be my daughter," he said in a low whisper to Avice; "I told her so. Don't forget to remind me of it, woman, when I feel the lie too heavy for me, and the truth rising in my throat. Do you hear?"

He waited for an answer and Avice murmured :

"Yes."

"She shall believe I am her father in time, nurse, shan't she?—I will be so cold, so respectful, so—but she will go away from me—she will go away when I am well!"

He fell into a restless sleep, from which he broke away with a cry of, "alone, alone," or "Avice," then fell asleep again and moaned throughout the night.

The fever passed away at last, and he was better; but when he became conscious of Avice at his side, of where he was, and of what accident had brought him down so low, Avice began to notice how often the name of "daughter" was applied to her; how he forced himself as to a task to breathe the name, and her own heart told her that the resolution of his fevered night abided with him—that he had given up all hope of being loved, and was moulding his firm mind to resist those feelings which had led him at one time to pour out the story of his passion, and which might still have tempted him had not the knowledge of the past

and the impossibility which lay in the present deterred him.

No, no, he would not wound her again—never again!

He got rapidly better, although he grew more despondent as he approached convalescence; he tried his best to appear cheerful and to talk of the days when he should be down stairs again, or on board ship and off upon his journey; but he broke down in his anticipations once or twice, and wished that he were ill again—no matter for what reason—he wished that he were ill—he cared not to be getting well so fast! A few days more, and he was allowed to leave his bed and sit up in his room, and a week before Christmas Day he was down stairs again and nearly well. He looked much older after his illness, and he turned hastily away from the large glass over the chimney-piece with a rueful expression of countenance.

“Avice, will you grant me a favour?” he asked, the day that he was down stairs for the first time.

“Yes, willingly.”

“Will you promise not to leave me till Christmas Day?”

Avice gave her assent, and sighed.

“When are you going to call at Miss Wrickerton’s?”

“I thought of looking in this evening for an hour.”

“Will you give my compliments to the ladies, and say how happy it will make me to have the pleasure of their company to dinner on Christmas Day?” said he. “You do not know, Avice, what a pleasant memory it will be to me—my last Christmas in England—if you and your two friends spend it with the old secretary.”

“I have no doubt of obtaining their consent.”

“Thank you,” he replied. “I do not say that I can give them a merry Christmas—there is too deep an association with that day for merriment—but we four have had our share of trouble, and shall be very good company together—eh, Avice?”

CHAPTER III.

"LEAP YEAR."

MISS WRICKERTON and Martha Badge accepted the kind invitation of Mr. Arthur William Stanmore, and kept Christmas with him at his house in Great George Street, Westminster. It was not a merry Christmas, as Mr. Stanmore had prophesied : there were no laughing faces, no rare jokes worthy of the season ; the boughs of holly over the mantelpiece did not conduce much to the general hilarity, and the mistletoe here and there was a bitter stroke of satire.

Yet there was a kind of half-happiness, in its way, peculiar to each of them, as if the spirit of that holy time had not forgotten even those four old-fashioned people, clustered round the Christmas hearth.

It was in the dull drawing-room that they were seated in the gloaming, the room lit by the fitful fire-light, the curtains still undrawn. It had been an early dinner, out of compliment to Miss Wrickerton and Mrs. Badge, and they had a long evening before them. Miss Wrickerton was quite at home ; she lay back in a pillowed chair, and smiled at everybody ; and Martha was spending a very comfortable evening, take it altogether, although she indulged in no talk on her own account. Avice was thoughtful and silent, and therefore it was left to Mr. Stanmore and Miss Wrickerton to sustain the conversation.

It was a disjointed kind of conversation, too, for Mr. Stanmore was subject to fits of reverie, and Miss Wrickerton, who had a cold, to fits of coughing ; but they maintained it pretty well between them, nevertheless.

"You do not know, strangers as we almost are, my dear Sir," said Miss Wrickerton, "how pleased I am to see you nearly well again. I was afraid that there was a long period of sickness before you."

"No—the papers were incorrect for once," said Mr. Stanmore, "thanks to my careful nurse."

"When do you leave England, Mr. Stanmore?" asked Miss Wrickerton.

"On New Year's Day, I think," he answered; "a fair day to begin a new life, Miss Wrickerton."

"Yes, very," said she in reply.

There was a long silence, finally broken by the last speaker.

"Avice, my dear, how quiet you are! What are you thinking about, child?"

Stanmore answered for her.

"There is always food for thought on a Christmas Day. It is a day associated with many memories; we date many of our joys and sorrows from it. Avice and I in particular."

"Ah! me," sighed Miss Wrickerton.

Avice roused herself from thought, and began to look about her.

"Well, Avice," said Mr. Stanmore, "we have taken a goodly number of farewells of each other in our time. I suppose we shall begin in earnest to-night."

Avice made an unintelligible reply.

Stanmore, by an effort, changed the topic to one more general, and one affording less matter for serious comment.

The blinds were drawn, the servants brought in lights, and the four sat and talked in an undertone, as if the room were full of listeners. It was a strange party for a gentleman of position to give on Christmas night!

As the time stole on, that depression, which had never been entirely removed, seemed to grow more deep. In other Christmas homes, even in the servants' room down stairs, where friends of the domestics were assembled, by special permission of Mr. Stanmore—the Millthorns amongst the number—there was a natural and contrary result; but then there was no certainty of an old and dear friend fading away, after that night, like a figure in a dream.

Stanmore did his best to shake off the sad impression, and to resist it; but his efforts grew more feeble with each hour that crept along the dial, and they had been all silent nearly half-an-hour, when Miss Wrickerton's carriage came to take the ladies home.

When Avice was with Miss Wrickerton and Martha in another room, and they were putting on their bonnets, Avice felt a nervousness stealing over her, against which she could hardly battle.

"My dear," said Miss Wrickerton, "how your hands are shaking! What's the matter?"

"It is very cold."

"Then you'd better go into the drawing-room, Avice. There's a larger fire there. Pray don't venture into the night air feeling cold, my dear. I shall not be ready these ten minutes; you know what a time I take. There go along!"

Avice complied, although with a little hesitation, and with a quicker beating of the heart; but there was nothing to fear now from him.—Was it fear?

She stood with her hand upon the door, still reluctant. It was so quiet inside, that she paused once more, and held her breath.

Tush! this was worse than folly! She turned the handle, and entered. Inside the room by the door, and motionless again, her hand upon her upheaved bosom, her black eyes straining at the figure by the fire, sitting there with a bowed head—the picture of despair. It was the work of one moment—the impulsive thought leaping from her warm young heart—the wish to break through, even with her own words, that ice that he had gathered round himself in defiance of his love. No time to think deliberately, to wait, to pause, she knew alone that she could lighten the burden of his grief, and she was by his side, one hand upon his arm, the other drawing away the shaking hand from his troubled face.

"Guardian, guardian, will you let me share your sorrow—your own Avice?"

He started wildly from his chair.

"Oh! Avice, Avice," he cried, "not you, now—not here at my side! I cannot bear to look upon your face, and know that I am to lose you for ever on this night. Leave me to myself—fly from the wicked wretch who vainly tries at self-command, and then gives way like a foolish child. Leave me, leave me, ere I pain you once again by a recapitulation of my raving folly. Avice, I beg of you to go!"

"Guardian, do you still bear me kind remembrance—still think of poor me as—as in those far-off days at Sanderstone?" she asked in a weak voice.

"I think of you ever—what else to think of is there left for me?"

"Have you not regretted the offer to make me your own

wife in all those long days which have intervened—never had one thought that it was so much the best that my life and yours were sundered? Has it never seemed as if—as if no love of mine could make you more content?"

"What—what do you—mean?" gasped Stanmore, passing one hand across his forehead.

She drew a long breath, and continued in a voice almost inaudible, every limb shaking, and all colour gone from her face.

"I mean this. If I stand alone between you and content—I—I am very bold, but it is—it is for you to pardon me—if but my love be needed to make you happy, to gladden your life and home; if you—you have not forgotten me, but still remember the 'Wildflower' you rescued from the world as one you would have had for your young wife in a time gone by, take me for that happy bride now, for I have the love of my whole heart to offer in return for yours!"

He clasped her with his free arm to his breast. He tried to speak, but his voice choked him in its utterance, and the big tears went rolling down his cheeks.

He found voice at last.

"Avice—you, you! It is not—cannot be. I am not deserving—my years, my life—consider—you, you would sacrifice—"

"No, no!"

"It is a dream—I must wake soon and find the barren world before me. Avice, dear Avice!"

"I am not worthy of you, Stanmore," she murmured, "not worthy of your great loving heart, or fit companion for you. I—I can but—"

"No more," he interrupted, "not another word. You are my own now! Do you remember one Christmas morning, and my daughter's dying words, Avice?"

"She knew my secret."

"She said my best days were yet to come, dear Avice. She was right. They stretch before me; they shed a radiance on everything; they make me a better man from this night. I give away all chance of fame, all hope of distinction in the foreign world, the scheming for place and rank in the lists that have been open to me: my life's ambition and its study is here—with WILDFLOWER!"

Shall the story close thus, or is there more to say ere we

write "FINIS" with reluctant pen? Shall we tell of Miss Wrickerton and honest Martha's surprise when they entered the room that Christmas night, and Stanmore led Avice by the hand towards them? Shall we speak of an engagement, a wedding, the beginning of a happy life, the conclusion of all sorrows? Is there more to say of Clifton, save that he is famous, or of Katie Millthorn save that she is married?

No, nothing more to say, dear reader mine. Close the book on Avice Hern's love story, and send to your library for the next new novel.

FINIS.

CHARLES LEVER'S WORKS.

RAILWAY EDITION.

WITH COVERS BY H. K. BROWNE (PHIZ).

HANDSOMELY PRINTED IN SMALL CROWN OCTAVO,

PRICE TWO SHILLINGS PER VOLUME.

THE MARTINS OF CRO' MARTIN. Double Volume, (3s.)

DAVENPORT DUNN : a Man of Our Day. In 2 Vols.

ONE OF THEM.

THE FORTUNES OF GLENCORE.

JACK HINTON, THE GUARDSMAN.

TOM BURKE OF "OURS." Double Volume, (3s.)

HARRY LORREQUER.

CHARLES O'MALLEY, the Irish Dragoon. 2 Vols.

THE O'DONOGHUE : an Irish Tale.

THE KNIGHT OF GWYNNE. In 2 Vols.

ROLAND CASHEL. In 2 Vols.

THE DALTONS. In 2 Vols.

THE DODD FAMILY ABROAD. Double Volume, (3s.)

BARRINGTON.

A DAY'S RIDE : A LIFE'S ROMANCE.

SIR JASPER CAREW.

MAURICE TIERNAY.

LUTTRELL OF ARRAN. Double Volume, (3s.)

The collected Works of CHARLES LEVER in a uniform series must, like the Novels of Scott, Bulwer, Dickens, and Thackeray, find a place on the shelves of every well-selected library. No modern productions of fiction have gained a greater reputation for their writer; few authors equal him in the humour and spirit of his delineations of character, and none surpass him for lively descriptive power and never-flagging story: and the whole Press of the United Kingdom has lavished the highest encomiums upon his works.

LONDON : CHAPMAN & HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

Sold by all Booksellers, and at the Railway Stations.

SELECT LIBRARY OF FICTION.

3s. 6d. CLOTH.

The best, cheapest, and most Popular NOVELS published, well printed in clear, readable type, on good paper, most suitable for presentation, and handsomely bound in gilt cloth, and gilt edges, price 3s. 6d.

NOTICES OF THE PRESS.

"The Fictions published by this Firm in their 'Select Library' have all been of a high character."—*Press*.

"Who would be satisfied with the much-thumbed 'Library Book,' when he can procure, in one handsome volume, a celebrated Work of Fiction, at this low price?"

"Capital Novels, well worth the price asked for them."—*Guardian*.

Agatha's Husband	Author of "John Halifax."
Head of the Family	Author of "John Halifax."
The Ogilvies	Author of "John Halifax."
Olive: a Novel	Author of "John Halifax."
Mary Barton	Mrs. Gaskell.
The Half-Sisters	Geraldine Jewsbury.
Ruth: a Novel	Mrs. Gaskell.
Jack Hinton	Charles Lever.
Harry Lorrequer	Charles Lever.
One of Them	Charles Lever.
Sorrows of Gentility	Geraldine Jewsbury.
Young Heiress	Mrs. Trollope.
The Constable of the Tower	W. H. Ainsworth.
Cardinal Pole	W. H. Ainsworth.
Hunchback of Notre Dame	Victor Hugo.
Lord Mayor of London	W. H. Ainsworth.
Elsie Venner	Oliver W. Holmes.
Country Gentleman	"Scrutator."
Beppo the Conscript	T. Adolphus Trollope.
Woman's Ransom	Author of "Grandmother's Money."
Deep Waters	Anna H. Drury.
Misrepresentation	Anna H. Drury.
Tilbury Nogo	Whyte Melville.

LONDON:

CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193, PICCADILLY.

MR. ANTHONY TROLLOPE'S WORKS.

Just ready, a Cheaper Edition, in One Volume, demy 8vo,
price 12s., cloth, with Forty Illustrations

CAN YOU FORGIVE HER?

Just published, a Cheaper Edition in One Volume, price 12s.,
with Thirty-nine Illustrations by J. E. MILLAIS.

ORLEY FARM.

Just published, a Cheap Edition, price 6s., with Illustrated Title and
Frontispiece.

MISS MACKENZIE.

Fifth and Cheaper Edition, in One Volume, post 8vo, cloth, price 6s.

NORTH AMERICA.

Fifth Edition, crown 8vo, cloth, price 5s.

The WEST INDIES and the SPANISH MAIN.

CHEAP EDITION OF POPULAR NOVELS.

Price 2s., picture boards.

THE BERTRAMS. Sixth
Edition.

DOCTOR THORNE. Eighth
Edition.

THE KELLYS AND THE
O'KELLYS. Fifth Edition.

CASTLE RICHMOND.
Fourth Edition.

THE MACDERMOTS OF
BALLYCLORAN. Third
Edition.

RACHEL RAY. Eighth
Edition.

TALES OF ALL COUN-
TRIES.

Sold by all Booksellers, and at the Railway Stations.

